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An analysis of programme decision-making in further education colleges in England

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An analysis of programme decision-making in further education colleges in England

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Declaration of Authenticity for Doctoral Thesis

I hereby declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education, contains no material previously published or written in any medium by another person, except where appropriately reference or citation has been made.

Abstract

The programme provision in a third of further education (FE) colleges in England is poorly designed, according to Ofsted which inspect colleges in England, and does not provide post-16-year-olds the skills needed for employment. The policy landscape shapes the complex FE college environment. Often programme decision-making at strategic level does not respond to stakeholders' needs or achieve stability and sustainability of these institutions.

The aim of this research was to analyse programme decision-making in FE colleges in England. It focused on how FE colleges use the opportunities and constraints presented by their locality and context to tailor their programme provision whilst under pressure to meet the local needs for the provision of education and training and the expectations of the Ofsted inspection framework.

A review of literature on the theories and models of decision-making led to the formation of research questions and a framework for the analysis of programme decision-making in FE college environment. Empirical data was collected by means of college principals and other senior managers in three contrasting FE colleges in England. Documentary analysis provided stimulus for interview questions and corroboration of evidence.

The research found that programme decision-making is influenced by the opportunities and constraints presented by the locality of the FE college and a number of internal and external factors. It shows that FE leaders and managers who prioritise leadership for learning, which is characterised by a strong focus on learners' learning experience, implement management approaches to the organisation of programme provision. Such focus informs the strategic directions to achieve effectiveness of programme provision and accountability, increase engagement with stakeholders and improve the sustainability of the college. The study shows that effective programme decision-making requires a collaborative approach involving the participation of stakeholders to provide a solution-driven method to managing programme provision in FE colleges.

List of abbreviations

AoC	Association of Colleges
BERA	British Education Research Association
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation & Skills
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CIF	Common Inspection Framework
DfE	Department of Education
EdD	Doctorate in Education
EFA	Education Funding Agency
FE	Further Education
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
FETL	Further Education Trust for Leadership
LEA	Local Education Authority
LEPs	Local Employer Partnerships
LSC	Learning Skills Council
LSIS	Learning Skills and Improvement Service
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education
RQ	Research Questions
SAR	Self-Assessment Reports
SFA	Skills Funding Agency
UK	United Kingdom

Chapter One: Introduction

1.0. Introduction

The aim of the research was to analyse programme decision-making in FE colleges in England. The study considered programme decision-making as an important activity senior leaders and managers undertake when managing their college programme provision. Located in the wider social, political and economic contexts, this enquiry helped to understand what happened when leaders responded to the sector's ever-changing political and economic landscape and over-regulated work of FE colleges.

From basic skills to postgraduate degrees, FE colleges cater for all ages from 14 upwards. They offer vocational, technical and academic teaching in a range of professions including: business, construction, creative arts, engineering, health care, hospitality and information technology. They offer a wide range of qualifications and training including: A-Levels, Apprenticeships, Entry-level training, Higher education, Traineeships and vocational qualifications. FE colleges often have links with companies, so that students studying vocational courses can combine classroom learning with valuable work experience. Many FE colleges offer higher education in partnership with local or regional universities and increasingly, they design courses especially for students from other countries (AoC, 2015).

Most FE colleges offer a range of programmes, courses and qualifications to diverse group of learners. From a wider social context, FE colleges occupy a pivotal space in the learning and skills landscape by offering education and training in a multiplicity of forms including full and part-time study, day release and evening classes, both in and out of the workplace. 744,000 16-to-18-year-olds chose to study at FE colleges compared with 433,000 in schools and 1.9 million adults benefitted from studying or training (AoC, 2015). For many people who have floundered in the school system, FE colleges have been an alternative route to success, frequently providing another avenue to university education. FE colleges possess "*a dual mission: to widen participation both into educational life and onwards into economic life"* (FETL, 2015, p.5). This assertion leaves open how FE colleges should plan the programmes they offer within increasing constraints imposed by the government.

1.1. The problem to be investigated

The programme provision in a third of FE colleges in England is often poorly designed and does not provide post-16-year-olds with the skills and training they need to gain employment in key sectors of the economy (Ofsted, 2015a, 2016). The leadership and management of these FE colleges are not making informed and robust decisions about the programmes they offer to respond to the needs of learners, employers and the local communities they serve. Programme decision-making at strategic level does not achieve stability and sustainability of FE colleges and there is not enough leadership capacity within the FE sector to enable improvement in education and training (Ofsted, 2015a). These concerns formed the rationale for this research enquiry into 'an analysis of programme decision-making in FE colleges in England'. The focus of the study was predominantly on programme decision-making for the provision of post-16 learners in FE colleges.

Programme decision-making in FE colleges is a complex research to undertake. The advice of Sadler-Smith (2006, p.5) seems appropriate in urging researchers to "*create an inquiring, reflective, contemplative and mindful approach* [when undertaking research] *in decision-making"*. The following research questions (RQs) enabled the aim of this research enquiry to be achieved:

i. *What are the internal and external factors that affect programme offer in an FE college?*
ii. *How do these factors affect programme decision-making and why?*
iii. *What are the consequences and the impacts of programme decision-making on FE colleges?*

The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), which inspects services that provide education and skills for all learners, reported weaknesses in the quality of provision which predominantly affects post-16 learners studying in FE colleges (Ofsted 2015a, 2016). Amidst concerns that the inspection framework is adversarial under Ofsted regime (Hodgson, 2015), and that a single adjective cannot sum up all the complexities within the sector (Coffield, 2017), a third of FE colleges inspected were found to 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate' (Ofsted, 2015a). Too many FE colleges are not making decisions to ensure their programme provision are aligned more closely with local, regional and national employment priorities (Ofsted, 2015a, 2016).

The debates about the benefits of inspection, the validity and reliability of its methods highlighted the tension that sometimes arose in the education sector's community when responding to the perceived top-down prescription and regulation by Ofsted (Hodgson, 2015; Coffield, 2017). The imperatives that shape the requirements of inspection regime are questioned as the Ofsted framework appears not to consider the complexities of FE colleges (Coffield, 2017).

1.2. Key changes to the purposes and organisation of further education since incorporation

1.2.1. Incorporation and freedom from local education authority control

The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) granted statutory independence from the Local Education Authority (LEA) to colleges of FE institutions. The act transformed FE colleges into corporate bodies (incorporation) responsible for managing their own finances, staffing and premises. Funded indirectly by central government through funding councils, also known as quangos, there were changes in the working conditions for teachers of FE, such as longer working hours and often larger classes. FE colleges had to compete with private training providers and schools offering sixth form provision that could access government funding through the same funding councils. The government argued that by entering into the competitive market: standards of vocational education and training would be raised; poorly performing colleges would fail and close or be taken over by their stronger competitors.

Soon after incorporation, the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and its inspectorate were established. A new concept of funding methodology was introduced to address three key issues: the uneven funding between colleges; the

poor student retention and achievement; and to satisfy the government's policy of greater efficiency applied across the public sector (Hodgson, 2015). The FEFC inspectorate introduced strict auditing regime (Gleeson, 1996) and as colleges competed to attract more students and maximise units to gain more funding, they reflected the "*heterogeneous and diverse nature of local and regional needs and remained organisations with no clear national strategic role* (Hodgson, 2015, p.15). During this period, services to students and participation rates were improved. Colleges found diverse ways to deliver learning programmes and become more flexible and responsive organisations (Hodgson, 2015).

Between 1997 and 2001, FE colleges experienced the 'demand-led' funding crisis and the demise of the FEFC. The fall was attributed to: market competition and unplanned growth (Lumby and Tomlinson, 2000); calls for widening participation and a clearer strategic role for FE colleges both nationally and locally (Fryer, 1997). Systematic changes took place during this period which Hodgson (2015, p.2) refers to the "*constant bombardment of national policy emanating from a bewildering range of ministries, government agencies and regulatory bodies directed at the FE sector* [since incorporation]".

1.2.2. The rise and fall of the Learning Skills Council

From 2001-2010, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) took over responsibility for all post-16 education and training with a remit to focus on growth, targets and strategic planning. Ofsted replaced the FEFC inspectorate with extended responsibility to inspect 16-to-19-year-olds in colleges. Three key impacts of the changes were observed: First, ability of LSC to fund a much wider range of FE institutions to encourage more strategic planning. FE providers enjoyed increases to their funding tied to targets, for example, a new business model, such as Train to Gain, led by the LSC emerged. Second, the ending of funding for the units of activity replacing them with cash payments based on full-time equivalents. Third, an increased focus on getting employers to have more influence on the FE sector and become consumer driven, leading to further attempts to meet learning needs of businesses (Hook, 2003).

Between 2005–2010, local planning was abandoned in favour of central control. Two government reports influenced this change: First, The Foster Review observed that the sector was over-regulated with too much emphasis placed on qualifications. The review suggested a re-alignment towards skills and employability. Second, the Leitch Review proposed moving to a system where funding was routed through employer-led schemes to meet the needs of employers, individuals and the labour market.

Notable achievements were observed during the LSC period: an increase in participation of 16-to-19-year-olds; a new focus on adult basic skills, the establishment of Centres of Vocational Excellence; significant increase in student success rates; and major investment in FE infrastructure (Coffield, 2008). Conversely, critics argue that FE colleges had been "*micromanaged by the government…perceived as not meeting employer needs or adequately tackling the high proportion of young people not in any form of education, employment or training*" (Hodgson, 2015, p.17).

1.2.3. Austerity, deregulation and 16-19 study programmes

Austerity and deregulation

From 2010 to date, the FE sector is experiencing a period of austerity (Bailey and Unwin, 2014; Hodgson, 2015). When the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government came to power in 2010, they pledged to drastically reduce public expenditure. Three key significant cuts were noted: the closure of Train to Gain; withdrawn funding for 14-19 Diplomas and the abolition of Education Maintenance Allowance in England. The reforms were also contradictory. FE students were funded based upon enrolment and qualifications passed in previous year and consequently removed central planning in favour of demand-led and outcome-led funding. Simultaneously, the government ring-fenced money to fund two million apprenticeships over a period of five years, resembling previous central planning and supply-led funding (Hodgson, 2015).

From September 2015, providers receive funding per student and not per qualification marking yet again another change to the funding methodology and organisation of FE colleges. The financial implication is wide-ranging as the government implement strategies to further reduce public spending and budget deficit. The impact on FE colleges is less money to manage the operations of their organisation including programme provision. The socio-economic challenges and the reasoning that underlie the funding regime present major concerns for senior leaders and managers responsible for programme decision-making.

16-19 study programmes

Against a background of poor provision of vocational education and learners who are inadequately prepared for employment in key sectors of the economy (Wolf, 2011), the sector faces more changes. FE leaders are under increasing pressure to improve the quality of programmes they offer. In March 2015, the Department of Education (DfE) issued non-statutory advice for senior leadership teams on the planning and delivery of 16-19 study programmes. The advice stipulates that all 16-to-19-year-old students should be given the opportunity to take a study programme which reflects their prior attainment by age, future education and career goals and aspirations.

The study programme principles applied in FE colleges vary, depending on students' prior attainment, abilities and ambitions. Considering that FE colleges predominantly offer post-16 education and the study programme is likely to form a sizeable proportion of the provision, this is an important observation in relation to programme provision decision-making. For many learners, the college is where they turn to when they have been let down vocationally, academically or socially by other parts of the education system.

1.2.4. Reflection: perennial issues since incorporation

Instability, political turbulence and funding dilemmas

Since incorporation, the FE sector has had to engage and respond to significant recurring issues. FE leaders had to deal with numerous external instabilities including: the inevitable technological and socio-economic changes, internal political turbulence as reflected in the changes of at least four governments'

political agendas and ongoing funding dilemmas brought on by austerity measures and reviews of funding methodology (Hodgson, 2015). It is not surprising that the consequences of this ever-changing and complex sector meant the parameters, role and mission of the FE sector is not well understood.

Nash and Jones (2015) identify two significant political imperatives that drove incorporation and subsequent developments affecting the purposes and changes to the organisation of FE colleges. First, the rising influence of the marketplace as a means to address UK skills shortages. For over two decades, politicians of all parties are still pursuing the same goals of a FE and training system that is responsive to local employers and learners. The constant appeal to employers to become involved in the design and funding of vocational education and training is relentless. The problem appears to be an inability to identify exactly how employers' involvement can be achieved (Hodgson, 2015). Second, the impact of the changing political priorities on the wider issues of accountability, participation and learning resulted in problems in implementing consistent policies and led to contradiction between maintaining the policy and strategy drivers at the centre while expecting colleges to be locally responsive. The parity of esteem between 14-19 academic and vocational routes has proved unreachable: A levels are still fixed in the minds of politicians as the only gold standard and the ongoing search to bring 14-19 provision relating it more closely the workplace (Hodgson, 2015). The issue for FE colleges remains the diminished supply of funds to meet the increasing needs of high-quality skills-driven education and training for all age groups whilst meeting the skills needs of the labour markets.

As recipients of public funding, FE colleges are accountable to a range of central government departments, funding agencies (BIS14/1012, 2014) and regulatory bodies. Ofsted's judgements of FE colleges feed into the DfE's intervention policies. If Ofsted judges a college as 'Inadequate', the secretary of state will issue an improvement notice. As such Ofsted policies are perceived as interventionist and viewed as "*an incubus rather than a catalyst for change"* (Coffield, 2017, p.69). The concerns of fears for the stability of FE colleges are palpable (Batchelor, 2014) and impact on all stakeholders. Senior leaders are ultimately held to account for the success or failure of their programme provision. Considering the accountability agenda (DfE, 2015), to what extent are senior leaders and managers accountable for leadership for learning and management of effective programme provision to ensure the long-term stability and sustainability of the college?

Survival of the fittest

FE colleges have been subject to funding squeeze for far a longer period than schools. Increasingly colleges must justify their survival not just against restricted budgets but also from growing competition from Sixth Form, Academies, University Technical Colleges, Studio Schools and Free Schools. The national budget for the education and training of 16-to-18-year-olds in 2014-15 was £250 million less than in 2013-14 (AoC, 2014). The systematic reduction of funding for students in full time post-16 education by an average of 12% and up to 17.5% for 18-year-olds in full time education (AoC, 2014), required many FE leaders to reassess their programme provision to confront the challenges of economic and turbulent times. How can FE leaders manage the pressures of diminished funding, financial accountability and competitive market-place?

The characteristics that divide strong FE colleges from those that are less successful will be multifaceted and complex. Successful FE institutions are likely to have an appropriate programme provision that:

> *"attract funding from a wide range of sources and interact directly with businesses, but with social purpose and responsiveness to their communities at the heart of what they do*" (BIS/1012, 2014, p.1).

Consequently, thriving FE colleges establish and maintain excellent partnerships and networks with employers, businesses and organisations which support their:

> *"vision and mission to develop a curriculum* [programme provision] *to meet the needs of learners, local employers and local and regional priorities. Such colleges will have comprehensible influential strategies, perceptive and dynamic management proficiency and an engaged staff culture across all areas of the establishment." (Ofsted, 2015a, p.17).*

The programme provision of less successful colleges often insufficiently meet the skills needs of local labour markets and learners (Ofsted, 2015b). Such programme provision is unlikely to be financially viable as enrolments on courses are too low to ensure long-term sustainability. Actions taken by leaders and managers to address programme improvement are often too slow to secure sustainable improvement (Ofsted, 2015b). These are serious and complex issues which come up time and again in many FE colleges' Ofsted reports. Notwithstanding the debate on the validity and reliability of Ofsted inspections, there are limited studies into why the programme provision of many FE colleges is failing to meet learners' and local needs. As a doctoral researcher and part time Ofsted inspector, my study highlights the key challenges of political, social and economic nature faced by FE leaders and managers as they make decisions for their programme provision.

Within the wider context of social, political and economic background described in this chapter, my advanced research enquiry analysed the factors that affect programme decision-making and the impact on the effectiveness of FE colleges to carry out their priorities. College effectiveness refers to the capability of the education provider to support young people to gain the knowledge, skills and qualifications to progress to further study or training, apprenticeships or sustainable employment (DfE, 2014).

1.3. The scope of the research enquiry

The study was born out of a genuine aspiration to improve understanding of programme decision-making in FE colleges in England, focussing on the leadership and management of programme provision for post-16 learners. To achieve the aim of the enquiry, it was important to focus on how FE colleges use the opportunities and constraints presented by their locality to tailor their programme provision.

FE colleges were used as case studies to analyse decision-making of their programme provision. When choosing the colleges to sample, I considered

features such as the location and size of the colleges, programme provision type, Ofsted grade at their last inspection and ability to gain access to the participants. Considering the challenges the FE sector is facing, an increased understanding of the issues described should enhance our comprehension of programme decision-making of the organisation of programme provision and management decisions in relation to post-16 learners.

1.4. The structure of the thesis

The thesis has six chapters, including this Introduction chapter.

Chapter two reviews literature on decision-making models, leadership and political influences, funding policies and accountability on decision-making in educational setting. A simple framework for programme decision-making in FE colleges is introduced for the key influencing factors to be analysed in terms of inputs, processes, outputs and feedback. The literature informs the development of the research questions and brings together elements of leadership, leadership for learning and management approaches to leading and managing programme provision in educational institutions.

Chapter three discusses the methodology, the strengths and weaknesses of establishing a defensible research in programme decision-making in FE colleges. It presents an account of the steps taken at each stage of the study, with reflection on methodological choices made.

Chapter four develops a set of findings on programme decision-making using three FE colleges as case studies. Qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews with senior leaders and curriculum managers is presented and supplemented by evidence from self-assessment reports, strategic plans and Ofsted reports. The findings are structured into three themes.

Chapter five provides a discussion of the themes emerging from the findings. Drawing from the literature reviewed in chapter two, it discusses the analysis of programme decision-making in FE colleges in relation to the research questions.

Chapter six presents the conclusion and includes reflections on the research enquiry and the findings. It discusses the original contribution to knowledge and practice made by this study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.0. Introduction

In this chapter I review literature pertaining to decision-making, decision-making models, leadership and other influences on programme decision-making in educational settings. A simple framework for programme decision-making in FE colleges is introduced for the key influencing factors to be analysed in terms of inputs, processes, outputs and feedback. The literature informs the development of the research questions and brings together elements of leadership, leadership for learning and management approaches to leading and managing programme provision.

2.1. Curriculum, programme and decision-making

It is appropriate to begin the literature review with an overview and interpretation of curriculum within the context of programme provision in educational setting.

2.1.1. A brief overview of the concept of curriculum and programme provision

Over the last six decades, many authors have offered definitions of curriculum. For example, Caswell and Campbell (1935) described curriculum as composing of all experiences children have under the guidance of the teacher. Curriculum theory goes beyond teaching strategies. It looks at the overall educational significance of the curriculum and focuses on how it intertwines with the individual, society and history (Pinar, 2012). Characterised as fragmented, elusive and confusing, the concept of curriculum is diverse and often open to interpretation (Cunningham, 2012). In examining the meaning of curriculum what become apparent are the differences in our understanding of the ways we view curriculum. Marsh (2013) suggests that curriculum can be broadly described as the concept of the programme of study provision in an educational journey, characterised by four key principles:

> *"i) concern with the experiences of learners; ii) making decisions about content and process; iii) making decisions about a variety of issues and topics; iv) involving many groups and decision-making at many levels"* (p.9).

Marsh's (2013) principles of programme of study indicate that the management of learners' learning experience, that is, the learners' educational journey, is fundamental to the management of programme provision. Consequently, leadership for learning characterises the skills curriculum leaders and managers must possess to achieve effective programme decision-making. As such the management approaches to leading and managing programme provision in education establishment is much wider than just the content of what is delivered, how or when it is delivered. It also involves leading and managing the people who are accountable for the delivery, their skills and capabilities. In educational establishment, this group of people includes educators (all those professionals working in the education system), for example, curriculum leaders and managers, teachers, tutors and assessors.

The further education vocational programme

The FE programme provision underwent a major review following the Wolf (2011) report. The review required FE providers to reconsider the programme of study they offer and ensure their provision meets local and national needs. Four additional recommendations impacted on the programme of study: First, that the sector offers substantive programmes that do not lead to 'cul-de-sac' qualifications; second, is the promotion of English and mathematics; third, is the development of employability skills, and fourth, is work experience opportunities for all full-time learners.

Wolf (2011) advocates that the principles of programme development in FE in England must underpin relevant vocational teaching and learning. McLoughlin (2013) shares this view and believes the key focus should be on programme design; re-invigorating business and employer engagement in the process; and creating flexibility for locally tailored elements to sit alongside any national core curriculum. The justification, he argued, is that this arrangement will ensure employers get the skills they need, whilst strengthening links between on and off the job elements of vocational programmes. This explanation outlines the key features of the vocational programme provision in FE colleges. As discussed in Chapter One, in the present challenging and ever-changing FE environment, programme decision-making is an important activity senior leaders and managers in FE colleges must undertake.

The next section explores the notion of decision and decision-making and sets the scene to review decision-making models.

2.1.2. Interpreting the notion of decision and decision-making

Decision is often interpreted as a conclusion or resolution reached after consideration. Langley et al (1995) endorse this definition and suggest that decision is a commitment to action a discrete and concrete phenomenon driven by rationality. Johnson and Kruse (2009, p.13) strengthen this description, adding that "*a decision is a conscious choice made between two or more competing alternatives*". Others offer variations of definition for decision based on the themes outlined so far, but concur that decision is a deliberate and decisive social action (Pomerol and Adam, 2002) concerned with choosing a conclusion about what we should do (Sanfey and Chang, 2008) when faced with a problem.

Whether the assumption of deliberation or interpretation is applied, the ubiquitous nature of the term 'decision' elicits the assumption:

> "*that the decision construct is a shared piece of tacit and uncontested knowledge…can be hard to pin down and is not identifiable and discernible as assumed*" (O'Sullivan, 2011, p.3).

Langley et al (1995) lay claim to the uncertain ontological status of 'decision' as a construct. O'Sullivan (2011, p.3), however, concedes that such status "*does not reduce the importance of decisions and decision-making as phenomena to those working in organisations*". He proceeds to quote Laroche's (1995, p.63-72) claim that:

> "*decisions are a significant part of organisational processes* [and] *decision-making plays a central role in the actualization of the organization strategic paradigm*" (O'Sullivan, 2011, p.3).

Nutt (2006) describes decision-making as the process by which thoughts and aspirations are translated into action. In FE institutions making decisions about programme provision is an important educational leadership and management activity and can be viewed as leadership in action. As such, it is a way in which educational leaders' skills, knowledge and intent become practical and evident to stakeholders (Rixom, 2011). Stakeholders can be people to whom leaders are accountable to or those for whom the leaders are accountable. Maringe (2012) recognises that individuals or groups utilise a range of competing choices about their organisation to reach implementable outcomes of decision-making.

2.1.3. Decision-making as a construct

To align decision-making as the focus of analysis of programme provision, O'Sullivan (2011) offers that decision-making is referred to as a construct. The author uses Hoy and Tarter's (2010, p.214) rational paradigm and describe decision-making as "*rational, deliberative, purposeful action, beginning with the development of a decision strategy and moving through implementation and appraisal of results*".

Barret et al (2005, p.214) assert the use of "*critical thinking skills to optimise a decision"*, supporting the concept of decision-making as a rational problem-solving process. Such reductionist and simplistic approach to decision-making is not new. Simon (1987, p. 279) warned that "*the very complexity that has made a theory of the decision-making process essential has made its construction exceedingly difficult*". O'Sullivan (2011) recognises the complex nature of organisational decisional behaviour as webs of activity and linkages, citing Langley et al's (1995, p.274) use of the phrase *"issue networks".*

2.2. Decision-making models

Hoy and Tarter (2010) summarise that the art of successful decision-making rests with the notion of matching the correct model with the appropriate situation. Predominant understanding of decision-making models identify three influential approaches: rational, non-rational (Langley et al, 1995; Simon, 1987) and collaborative approaches (O'Sullivan, 2011). These models differ in several ways and can be broadly described as rationalistic/analytical, naturalistic/intuitive and group-centred/shared approaches (see for example, Law and Glover, 2000; Klein, 2003).

2.2.1. Rational decision-making

Rational decision-making is a process whereby a set of steps is followed, from problem identification through to solution encompassing a review of relevant facts before a logically effective decision is made. Based on scientifically obtained data that allow informed decision-making, Simon (1978), identifies three main advantages of the rational model: reduction in the chances of errors; less margin for distortions and elimination of assumptions, guesswork and subjectivity.

The rational approaches to decision-making are favoured by leadership and management and occupy a dominant cultural position (Klein, 2003). The rationalist view has significant consequences for how decision-makers recognise the processes and quality of their decisions. Nayab (2011, p.1) captures this view and offers that the rational approach to decision-making:

> "*infuses the decision-making process with discipline, consistency and logic* [as it] *requires defining problem, identifying the weighing and decision criteria, listing out various alternatives, deliberating the present and future consequences of each alternative and rating each alternative on each criterion to arrive at the optimal decision".*

Johnson and Kruse (2009) argue that extreme assumptions are often made about the rational approach to decision-making and warn of the potential 'deification' of the decision-maker as the 'omniscient optimiser'.

Paradoxically, citing Langley et al (1995), O'Sullivan (2011, p.5) identifies "*the reification of the decision, the dehumanization of the decision-maker, and the isolation of the decision-making process*" of the rational model. The decision-makers often become unpopular with the subordinates who perceive them as insensitive and autocratic leaders where emotions have no place in what constitutes 'rationality' (Nayan, 2011). The characteristics identified in the rational approach "*ignore the complexity and messiness of much of real life decision-making and strip it of much of its agency and context"* (O'Sullivan, 2011, p.5). The author agrees with Lindblom's (1979) classification of rational decision-making as "*synoptic [*and] *the need for a high degree of comprehensiveness of information and analysis"* (p.5)*,* accentuating the unrealistic expectation characterising the rational paradigm.

Carey (2008) and Nayab (2011) propose that the rational model is based on several assumptions, but two main ones are noted: the availability of accurate data and information about the issue and the competence of the decision-maker. The underlying assumption is that these conditions remain stable and the quality, quantity, accuracy and integrity of information are sound.

O'Sullivan (2011, p.7) observes that "*the normative orthodoxy is questionable when we consider the way decisions are subject to the affect, memories, and imagination of the decision-maker(s)".* Such assumptions and the reliance on stable conditions at worst lead to poor decision outcomes, at best force the decision-maker to improvise (Nayab, 2011). An alternative, offers O'Sullivan (2011) is to consider 'satisficing' as decision strategies when more imaginative or creative action is desirable. As Nayab (2011, p.1) countered:

> *"reliance on cold facts requires ignoring or paying secondary importance to sensitive human relationship and values…*[It] *erodes the organisation of its intellectual capital and resilience, sowing the seeds for its eventual destruction".*

The use of rationality as an approach to decision-making can cause confusion (Stacey, 2000) because decisions are not always clearly defined or understood. O'Sullivan (2011, p.4) submits that:

> "*the decision-making process is more tangled than rational models acknowledge* [and] *involves interactions among decision-makers* [who constitute] *a key component in shaping the making of decisions".*

Summary of rational decision-making

The limitations of the idealised rational process are recognised as: time-consuming and complex to use (O'Sullivan, 2011); requires careful consideration and deliberation of data; is most likely to yield tangible results in the long run and is therefore unsuitable for quick decision-making (Nayab, 2011). Rational decision-making approach should be "*used as a facilitating tool to aid decision-making and supplement the existing system in certain situations"* (Nayab, 2011, p.6). The non-rational processes which utilises "*intuition, emotions, values and heuristics"* (O'Sullivan, 2011), which I now briefly turn to, may partly influence the way decisions are arrived at.

2.3. Non-rational decision-making

Effective decision-making should utilise a combination of rational and non-rational processes (Simon, 1987). While emotions are viewed as compromising the dominant rationality paradigm (Gigerenzer, 2001; James and Jones, 2008), leaders and managers as decision-makers should be able to interpret, make sense of and apply meaning of their own context (Stake, 2000). As Atwood (1987, p.154) advocates, "*context is all'.* Decision-makers in educational organisations must be cognisant:

> "*of the decision context and its multiple dimensions which encompass features from cultural social, community, organisational, informational, resource, temporal and risk realms"* (O'Sullivan, 2011, p.10).

While Johnson and Kruse (2009, p.94) advise that "*decisions are not made in a vacuum",* O'Sullivan (2011, p.11) cautions that it is difficult to charge the individual decision as the primary element of analysis. Decisions should be interacting and interlinked *"issue stream*s" (Langley et al, p.12). Dimmock and Walker (2002) advocate a collaborative and participation approach in educational setting, thus using the term 'collegiality' resulting in decision-making that is more team based.

2.4. A collaborative approach to decision-making

The role of collaborative decision-making is an important consideration when examining decision-making in educational organisations. The group-centred decision responsibility is a significant move away from the more traditional managerial decision authority vested in the sole decision-maker (Law and Glover, 2000).

The collaborative approach is seen to play a mitigated role within individual decision-making (Humes, 2000) and consequently improves the decision-making quality (O'Sullivan, 2011). However, questions are often raised about the issue of accountability, specifically as to who should take the ultimate decision and responsibility on behalf of the organisation.

2.4.1. Collegiality and collaboration

The decentralisation of educational leadership and management calls for participative decision-making, involving group-based decisions to improve learning outcomes. It is unlikely that leaders who occupy senior positions in educational organisation will have all the information they need to make sound decision.

In educational institutions, the term 'collegiality' is often used to describe the type of decision-making attitude which promotes group collaboration and participation (Wallace, 2001; Dimmock and Walker, 2002). The notion of group participation encourages high quality decisions that are consistent with the goals of the organisation and facilitate the implementation of the decision because the group members understand and support the decision (see Law and Glover, 2000; Vroom and Yago, 2008).

James and Jones (2008) are cognisant of the increased collaborative approach to decision-making in school environments, identifying:

> "*the growing need for teachers' collaboration for curriculum change* [and] *the increased complexity of schools which militates against school leadership being vested in a single person*" (p.4).

This observation could be applicable to FE colleges. O'Sullivan (2011, p.9) agrees that the collaborative approach to decision-making:

> *"fits well with the values of many educational professionals who prize collegial norms and traditions in areas like curriculum design, resenting what they see as threats to collegial values from managerialist and marketization trends*".

In FE colleges, the accountability agenda exerts numerous pressure at all levels of the organisation structure (Hodgson, 2015). Consequently, the need to collaborate in programme decision-making is prevalent across FE leaders and managers.

2.4.2. The weaknesses of collaborative decision-making

Boundless (2015, p.5) recognises that the "*issue of diffusion of responsibility that results in a lack of accountability for outcomes"* presents a major concern for collaborative decision-makers. Accountability pervades programme decision-making and is further explored later in this chapter. The success of collaborative decision-making lies in the location of authority, encompassing, who is managing the group (Sheard, 2007) and who is being held to account. O'Sullivan (2011, p.10) agrees with Wildy et al (2004) for recognising that a leader or manager in an educational setting:

> "*may experience dissonance in the expectation to involve others in decision-making while retaining the ultimate responsibility to 'carry the can' for the decision and its outcomes".*

Perhaps one of the greatest inhibitors of effective collaborative decision-making is group-think. Described as a psychological phenomenon, group-think:

> "*occurs within a group of people in which the desire for harmony or conformity results in an irrational or dysfunctional decision-making outcome"* (Boundless, 2015, p.6) brought on by an increase in "*support for the dominant value"* (Myers and Bishop, 1971, p.386).

The primary consequence of group-think is that consensus sought within the group is not reached as the suppression of individual opinions and creative thought process result in poor decision-making (Janis, 1982). Decisions and course of actions are taken in the guise of collective rationalisation and self-censorship of the group (Turner and Pratkanis, 1998). Steps can be taken to minimise the dangers of group-think. By breaking up large groups into smaller ones and assigning a leader, members of the group could be given the chance to express their own ideas without the key leader present to avoid overly influencing the decision (Meyer, 2002; Cherry, 2010). It is further recognised that "*groups may increase the polarization effect",* (O'Sullivan, 2011, p.10), create the "*illusion of unanimity"* (Wiseman, 2009, p.257) leading to group members reaching a consensus decision without critical evaluation of alternative viewpoints (Boundless, 2015).

In collaborative decision-making, where members group together as equals, it is critical that participation is: clearly defined; has clear boundaries; and consistent organisational preferences (Vroom, 2003). The problem arises when goals are not clear and participants "*dump problems and solutions as and when they are generated"*, resulting in the "*garbage can model"* which is characterised by *"problematic preferences, unclear technology and fluid participation"* (Rixom, 2011, p.41).

Summary of collaborative decision-making

Advocates of the collaborative approach maintain that greater group participation in decision-making leads to greater commitment to and ownership of change (Law and Glover, 2000). Participation in decision-making has certain dynamics (Rixom, 2011), but with participation by groups require careful alignment of the participants, which is fundamental to achieving a shared objective. General acknowledgement of the benefits of decision-makers working in collaboration includes: wider involvement and participation resulting in greater decision acceptance (the decisions made are likely to consider the effect of all the interested parties) and more successful implementation (Vroom, 2003).

The role of the head of the institution in developing the team's capability to make better quality decisions (Law and Glover, 2000) results in the leader's ability to cultivate teamwork and devolve decision-making to those teams (Meyer, 2002). The shortcomings of collaborative decision-making raise two limitations. First, the contrived collegiality described by Wallace (2001) as the incongruence occasionally apparent amid the advocacy of collaborative decision-making and the actual implementation of the strategy in practice (James and Jones, 2008). Second, the support of collaboration in decision-making may sometimes represent a strategy of control to help create greater institutional legitimacy (Humes, 2000).

The collegial approach could be damaged by managerialism, for example, using "*directive drivers as an underpinning structure rather than the innate collaborative principles of collegiality,"* (Rixom, 2011, p.128). In educational setting, the collegial

ethos in decision-making is the preferred process, "*exercising a powerful sway over decision-makers and their practice and adding legitimacy to resulting decision outcomes*" (O'Sullivan, 2011, p.10).

2.5. Leadership influences on decision-making

An essential factor in various description of leadership is that there is a process of influence. Yukl (2002, p.3) captures this process as:

> *"most definitions of leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a social influence process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person [or group] over other people [or groups] to structure the activities and relationships in a group or organisation."*

The author's use of 'person' or 'group' indicates that leadership could be practised by individuals as well as teams. Although such view is widely shared (see for example, Leithwood, 2001, Harris, 2004), others, for example, Bush and Glover (2003) and Simkins (2005) rationalise that: leadership resides in individuals; is hierarchically based; and occurs when leaders do things that make a difference to organisational performance.

2.5.1. Decision-making and leadership

Contemporary research in educational environments confirms the importance of leadership in decision-making (Hoy and Tarter 2010). Furthermore, researches into the application and experience of decision-making have revealed that decisions made in educational settings: happen in complex organisational situations (Maringe, 2012); involve diverse constituencies; are subject to numerous and conflicting demands; and are people intensive (Johnson and Kruse, 2009; O'Sullivan, 2011).

Chapman (2001) opines that decision-making involves two key leadership activities. First, the exercise of judgement, which requires the leader to decide how the action should unfold. Second, is the use of the leader's influence to manage the behaviour of others to implement actions. These activities are increasingly significant when organisations and their environments are in a state of flux because the expectations of leaders and managers will become more fluid and require them to draw on their creative decision-making (Chapman, 2001).

Dimmock and Walker (2002) remarked that the ability to make good decisions with self-confidence is one of the key characteristics of effective and good educational leadership. Johnson and Kruse (2009, p.26) agree, adding that "*decision making lies at the heart of managerial behaviour*" and that leaders and managers should recognise when input from the team is required. Harnish (2013) identified several outstanding features of successful and influential leaders: they can devise plans and strategies quickly, then effectively communicate these strategies to their team; ensuring these plans are seen through, regardless of external pressure or unforeseen circumstances; and continually evaluate their team's progress, highlighting potential problems or re-evaluating if a strategy is not paying the expected dividends. Good leaders, concedes Harnish (2013) collaborate and involve trusted advisors and subject matter experts, so that they can access a

constant flow of data and information to make and take better decisions (see also Chapman, 2001).

Leadership in further education colleges

The creation of statutory FE corporations in 1992 crystallised characteristics that still define colleges in the present day. FE colleges were not 'set free' in 1992 but involved a transfer of power over property, staffing and courses from local government to college governing bodies and college leaders, giving them wide scope to make decisions (Hodgson, 2015). Given that teaching and learning are the core purposes of colleges, the author argues that the central task of college leadership is to respond to and shape the way staff view their work and students' experience of their time at college. But, leadership is complex, relational, contextual and dependent on the individuals who are exercising it (Jupp, 2015). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that leadership approaches to leading and managing programme provision in colleges is fundamental to shaping the college values and core purposes.

Effective leadership in FE necessitates clear educational mission, supported by appropriate values shared at every level in a college (Jupp, 2015). The author maintains that the hallmark of an effective principal is when leadership is spread throughout the college:

> "…*the evidence of leadership will be found in the way staff at all levels see their jobs; how well supported they feel; whether they recognise their contribution to their college and feel recognised…and listened to."* (p.180).

Conversely,

> *"…an ineffective principal fails to create a sense of common values and purpose across the whole college and this in turn allows the erosion of accountability and of ambition for students."* (p.180).

Studies of the role of effective leaders in education emphasise leaders' characteristics as:

> "*those better able and more disposed to creating structures and processes that facilitate efficient and effective organisational decision-making*" (Maringe, 2012, p.465).

Since incorporation, the emphasis has been and continues to be on the capability of FE college leadership team to manage their colleges more effectively. However, the impact of leadership effectiveness in FE colleges is of little gain unless "*…it improves classroom quality or contributes to better strategic positioning for a college."* (Jupp, 2015, p. 181). Maintaining a focus on learners' learning experience and creating the conditions that are favourable to learning are features of leadership for learning (Marsh, 2013; Jupp, 2015).

2.5.2. Complexity and political influences on decision-making

The volume and pace of change in the FE sector is numerous and complicated (Green, 2013) and presents significant challenges for the sector. The author articulates the complexity of the FE landscape:

> *"Changes* [in FE] *are multiple and complex…*[including]*… reductions in government funding and changes in funding methodology…together with a strong push for improved public information to facilitate effective decision-making by learners, parents and employers; and the devolution to new local and regional structures"* (Green, 2013, p.7).

Complexity

The complex environment in which FE operates is unprecedented (Maringe, 2012), unpredictable and often political (O'Sullivan, 2011). The complexity arises from often unclear goals, role and purposes of FE in England (Foster, 2005, Wolf, 2011). Whilst the role of FE colleges in the provision of vocational education and training is perhaps best known, the sector's identity and purpose are somewhat opaque as few understand its parameters and mission (Hodgson, 2015). The FE sector has a wide remit to deliver post-16 education and training to a diverse group of learners, including community groups, residents, businesses and employers. Servicing this eclectic mix of stakeholders presents enormous challenges for FE leaders who have a remit to lead and manage their programme provision to meet the differing needs of a wide range of learners.

The context of FE institutions must also be considered. For example, the location, the catchment area, intake of students and history of the institution. Each institution will present a particular and sometimes unexpected set of opportunities and constraints. The Ofsted inspection regime has come under criticism for "*not taking sufficient account of the adverse local circumstances"* in which some FE colleges are working, and the Ofsted framework does not have different criteria for judging those tough colleges "*serving areas of social deprivation, poor housing and high unemployment which suffer from chronic recruitment difficulties"* (Coffield, 2017, p.52). Consequently, the local context of colleges is likely to become an important and active force for which allowances are not made when inspection takes place.

The complexity of the FE establishment is further exacerbated by the complicated organisational structure which exists in most colleges (Wolf, 2011). As FE strives for more accountability and effectiveness, the involvement of several people in collaborative decision-making process impacts on the effectiveness of management and accountability (Maringe, 2012). Johnson and Kruse (2009) remind us that as organisational participants we not only make decisions that affect the organisations we inhabit, we are influenced by the decisions made by colleagues in our organisation. We influence and are thus influenced.

The extent to which complexity of decision contexts and scenarios (O'Sullivan, 2011) play in decision-making must not be underestimated. Decisions in real life are often embedded in a wider context, are time constrained and could carry high stakes, resulting in consequences that can pose a threat to personal and/or professional identity and influence employment. The impact that flexibility exerts

on decision-makers by the reality of uncertainty and fluid contexts gave rise to revised notions such as 'satisficing' and 'bounded rationality' (Simon 1987) and Lindblom's (1979) 'muddling through' models.

Leaders of FE colleges are under increasing pressure to be more accountable and yet remain autonomous (Hodgson, 2015) when deciding on their programme provision. As O'Sullivan (2011, p.12) observed, the "*neat rational solutions of idealised decision models are neither realistic nor always reliable in a context demanding change*".

Political influence

The political influence on decision-making is noteworthy. Johnson and Kruse (2009) explore the notion that all 'social collective' including educational organisations exhibit political behaviour, positioning decision as the focal point of almost all political activity. Hoy and Tarter (2010) document the components of competing goals and the influence of the political model of decision-making.

As education comes into sharper political focus for successive UK government, so too are the concerns about educational standards in FE. Concerns about the ability of FE colleges to respond to the needs of learners, employers and the communities they serve were discussed in Chapter One. In summary, some FE colleges are failing to provide high quality vocational education and training and are not preparing learners adequately for employment (Wolf, 2011). While Ofsted (2016) apportion such failure to the leadership and management of FE colleges, Coffield (2017) contests the guiding assumption that the key factor in improving standards in education is leadership, stating there is no hard evidence to back up this claim.

Inspection in England has become a contentious issue and has come under criticism. Coffield (2017) states that Ofsted's method does not reflect what we know about how learning best occur or how change can be brought about in systems and organisations. The author proclaims that the methodology of inspection has been shown to be invalid, unreliable and at times unjust. Consequently, educators are distracted from trying new teaching methods and introducing new programme towards meeting the ever-changing demands of Ofsted. Education leaders and teachers are putting their institution before those of their students and this did nothing to improve students' learning. Writing about the status of Ofsted, Coffied (2017), recognises that the inspectorate has recently taken an optimistic turn on two significant issues: collaboration between the inspectorate and the educational establishment; and the determination towards a fully self-improving system in educational establishment.

The concerns outlined above can be viewed within the broader context of political influence and subsequent developments affecting colleges, particularly:

> "*…the rising influence of the marketplace as a means of addressing UK skills shortages and the impact of changing political priorities on the wider issues of accountability and learning."* (Nash and Jones, 2015, p24).

Nash and Jones (2015) summarise the impact of political interference since incorporation: "*FE sector urgently needs stability and an end to the constant*

reforms, changes in the machinery of government, and administrative reorganisation" (p.42). The impact of the changes has deeply affected the context and priorities for leadership of the sector.

With the focus on achieving outstanding quality of teaching and learning, the FE sector is on a journey in which more and more emphasis is being given to ambitions for students (Hodgson, 2015). Leadership for learning is the priority for FE leaders. Jupp (2015) identifies areas of practice for leaders, including: investing time and resources to promote the professional development of staff; closer involvement in the management of teaching programme including the management of programme provision; and setting clear directions for the college.

2.6. Funding in further education

Quite separate from the Incorporation Act (1992) is the funding method, the overall level of funding, and the funding-led political priorities of government and policymakers. Gaining incorporation status meant FE in England worked as autonomous organisations in terms of deciding their own mission and priorities. However, their main funding still comes from national governments. The bureaucratic funding policy and practice requiring different agencies to fund different types of learner (Wolf, 2011) increases the complexity of programme decision-making in FE.

After incorporation, the number of adults participating in studies and activities that are not related to their work fell, as the funding system focused mainly upon students obtaining qualifications (Green 2013). To clarify, provision for post-19 and post-25-year-olds are no longer primarily publicly-funded, and this poses new types of leadership challenges in terms of college financial security (Jupp, 2015). Following the recession in 2008 and the policy of cutting adult provision to pay for 16-to-19-year-old provision, college leaders have experienced substantial financial cuts. As these financial reductions continue, college leaders face a duo of challenges: reducing internal costs and strategically repositioning their establishment away from adult provision (Jupp, 2015).

National policies, particularly around funding, thus play a significant role in shaping the way FE leaders lead and manage their programme provision. Green (2013) supports this observation, adding that:

> *"in an environment where funding and quality assurance mechanisms have been driven by qualifications and a focus on success rates, and where funding pressures have limited the appetite for experimentation and risk, the capacity for curriculum change is in need of development"* (p.7).

Monitoring sound finance is vital for colleges. However, in the context of on-going financial pressures, there are dangers for FE leadership. As Jupp (2015) rationalises, FE leaders may feel under pressure to reduce new programme development, professional development or management delegation. If these features of leadership for learning are priorities for FE colleges, the bottom line should not be money but student success.

2.7. Accountability and decision-making

Accountability permeates education in England. Bush (1994) asserts that:

> *"at minimum, accountability means being required to give an account of events or behaviour in a school or college to those who may have a legitimate right to know. One of the central aspects of accountability relates to establishing which individuals and groups have that legitimacy" (p.310).*

Moreover, accountability, according to Thurlow (2009), is the assignment of responsibility for conducting activities in a certain way or producing specific results. Being held to account is to be responsible for, be answerable to or explain one's action. Historically, accountability for colleges had been based on student enrolment (Hodgson, 2015). Leaders and managers of FE colleges are accountable for equipping learners with the skills they need to find sustainable work or support them to gain the knowledge and qualifications to progress to further study or training. Making decisions on a programme provision that meet this need is a significant role of FE leaders.

The policy landscape in which FE colleges exists, shapes the elaborate and fragile ecosystem of the sector (Powell, 2017) as it adjusts to a decentralised demand and command system of accountability and policy levers (Hodgson, 2015). Consequently, the changes have greatly increased the number of individuals and groups that can claim legitimacy of accountability. In addition to being internally accountable to their governing body, the nature and scope of the operations carried out by FE colleges, means that they are also accountable to several external stakeholders. Three key areas of accountability are identified.

First, as customer-facing, FE colleges are accountable to learners. Educators need to be "*more attentive, in sustained or routine ways to what students want to say about their experience of learning*" (Hargreaves, 2004, p.2). Walker and Logan (2008, p.4) concede that:

> "*failure to engage with learners in the education process risks increasing disengagement and disillusion amongst learners with their educational experiences*".

Positive engagement with learners generate good practices, enabling learners to participate collaboratively in programme activities so that they take control of their own learning and improve their educational experience at the college (Somekh et al, 2006; Walker and Logan; 2008, Wallace, 2001). Such a shared approach to decision-making is supported by Hoy and Tarter (2010). The authors promote the "*Participation rule*" which recognises the benefits of involving "*others in decisions when they have a personal stake and are confident they will decide on what is best for the group"* (p.358)*.*

Second, as publicly funded service providers, FE colleges are recipients of significant public funds and are affected by "*the use of particular forms of accountability…for example performance measures, inspection, funding* [rules]*"* (Hodgson, 2015, p.202). Known as New Public Management, the intention was to

give greater autonomy to public service providers (such as FE colleges), more power to the users (students, parents, carers) and avoid bureaucracy. Graystone et al (2015, p.144) argue that in practice, successive "*governments interpreted accountability as increasing regulation, setting targets and introducing greater openness and transparency in the way*" colleges conducted their business.

Third, as social enterprises FE colleges are accountable to the communities they serve. Hodgson (2015, p. 208) refers to the role of FE within *"its local learning ecology"* and suggests the need for accountability at a wider level across the college locality including future learners, employers and regional and national professional associations.

As a publicly funded sector, FE colleges experience high levels of accountability. Historically, accountability had been based on student enrolment and many colleges had incomplete and misleading student data (Hodgson, 2015). The introduction of a new accountability system for colleges, implemented in academic year 2014-15, aimed at setting higher expectations and making the system of accountability fairer, with intentions to build a culture of transparency and honesty of data. As Hodgson (2015, p.183) asserts, *"there could be no consistent quality without transparent data".* The accountability system, which is part of the management information data is available to funding and quality assurance agencies and which FE leaders and managers must use when making decisions about their programme provision. The measures provide a rounded picture of the education provider's performance which is used in several ways including the four identified here: informing student choice; informing a provider's own self-assessment and benchmarking; informing inspection; and informing government's performance management of the 16-19 sector (Hodgson, 2015).

Consequently, FE leaders and managers must be able to budget effectively while focusing on improving learning outcomes for students. Linking accountability to an image of 'improved performance' instils the notion of fear (Dubnick, 2005) in some individuals and gives the perception that one's behaviour and practice need to be monitored. Accountability to students, to governors and to the funding agencies, in other words, groups that have legitimacy of accountability, is central to stewardship and leadership (Hodgson, 2015). Against a background of reduced funding and accountability, how do FE leaders plan their programme provision to ensure the long-term stability and sustainability of the college?

2.8. Organisational structure in further education

The management structure (see Figure 2: Appendix C) in FE sets out the foundation for how the education establishment organises and sets its routine, operates and delegates tasks and responsibilities. Consequently, the structure will inform how decisions are made and implemented across the organisation.

FE colleges are likely to adapt a structure to fit their mission and purpose. The structure therefore delineates the role employees assume as well as the formal lines of authority to make decisions that would impact on the programme provision. As part of the college management structure, FE leaders and managers play a significant role in programme decision-making.

Whilst there is no 'right' structural organisational model for colleges to adopt, a management structure (similar to Figure 2: Appendix C) that has clear lines of responsibility and accountability, support effective decision-making and promote the flow of information from grass roots level to senior leadership team (Rixom, 2011).

2.9. Summary of literature review

The literature reviewed have provided an understanding that the focus on the experiences of learners during their educational journey underpins leadership approaches to leading and managing programme provision in educational institution. FE leaders are tasked with the responsibility of making decisions about their programme provision to ensure relevance to individuals, society and the economy (Wolf, 2011; Pinar, 2012, Hodgson, 2015).

FE colleges offer a diverse array of programmes to groups and individuals ranging from 16-to-18-year-olds to adults. The leaders and managers of these establishments encounter many challenges as they revise their programme provision to be more responsive to the needs of all learners. The autonomy to offer a programme provision that aligns with the vision and mission of the college seems to present leaders and managers with contradictory demands (Hodgson, 2011). Making decisions on the programme provision encompasses the notion of accountability and involves leaders and managers at all levels (Rixom, 2011) to have a clear focus on leadership for learning. In FE, the conditions to offer a programme provision to fit the needs of all stakeholders are often uncertain and as unclear as the goals of the sector. As Nayab (2011) urge leaders to carefully consider and use available data and tools to aid decision-making in a rational approach, O'Sullivan (2011), cautions the use of intuition when making decisions. With very little literature on programme decision-making in FE, this study provides an understanding on the leadership and management of programme provision in FE colleges.

The argument for collaborative approach to decision-making in education settings is strong (Vroom, 2003; James and Jones, 2008; Hoy and Tarter, 2010). With the suggestion that increased participation leads to greater support for implementing decisions (Vroom, 2003), educational leaders who involve staff in decision-making are perceived as strong leaders (Maringe, 2012) and more likely to occupy the role of 'ratifier' of decisions arrived at in collaborative contexts. The collaborative approach has several benefits: to promote shared responsibility and greater team commitment to decision making (Hoy and Tarter, 2010); justifies teacher's entitlement to participate in decisions that affect their work and can lead to improved decision outcomes, enhanced communication and increased decision ownership (James and Jones, 2008). This thesis attempts to contribute to the minimal focus within the literature that has sought to better understand FE leadership within the context of programme decision-making in FE colleges in England.

Johnson and Kruse (2009) suggest that educational organisations exhibit political behaviour which affects most decisions. Hoy and Tarter (2010) highlight the competing goals and the influence of the political model on decision-making. The decision-makers in the political context of educational organisation may be influenced by the concerns of other stakeholders, including policy makers,

learners, parents, employers and governors (O'Sullivan, 2011). As FE leaders continue to experience competing demands from groups that claim legitimacy of accountability, this study provides leadership evidence on the management approaches to leading and managing programme provision in FE colleges.

2.10. A framework for programme decision-making of further education colleges in England

This section explains the creation of a simple framework (Figure 1) based on the open systems model (Scott, 2003). From an open systems perspective, an organisation:

> "*is viewed as a complex set of dynamically intertwined and interconnected elements, including its inputs, processes, outputs, and feedback loops and the environment in which it operates and with which it continuously interacts*" (Shafritz et al, 2015, p.340).

For this study, the model has a more restricted application and will be used as a simple lens through which to analyse the comments of the participants through the research questions. Furthermore, it will ensure that the participants consistently understand the FE jargon being used, not only to identify the contexts of programme provision prevailing in FE colleges but also the influences of internal and external factors. In the Discussion chapter, the findings will be mapped back to the research questions using the simple framework.

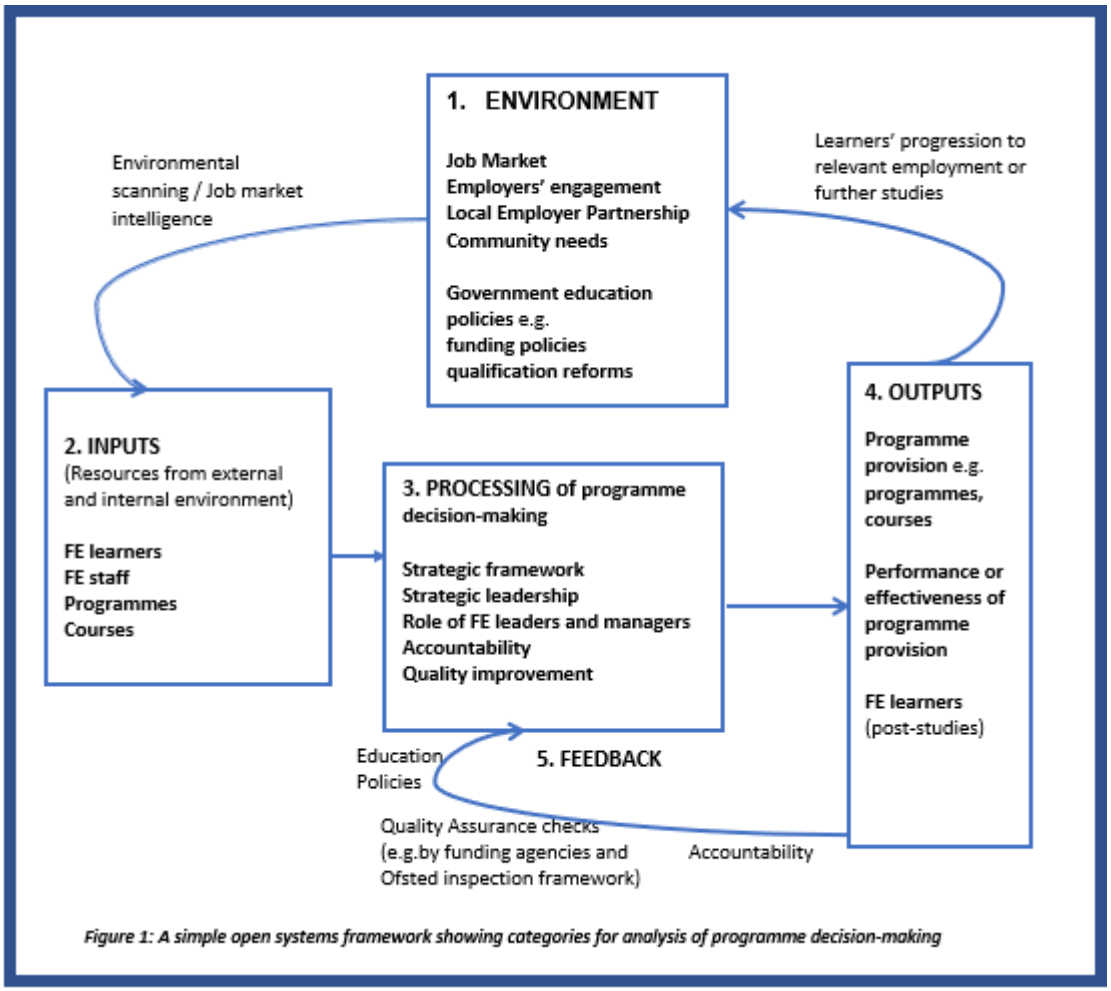

Figure 1: A simple open systems framework showing categories for analysis of programme decision-making

The **Environment** represents the elements external to the FE college programme provision. The job market is likely to influence the environment in which FE operates. For example, engaging with Local Employer Partnerships (LEPs) and understanding of government-centrally-driven funding policies and qualification reforms present opportunities as well as constraints for the leadership, management and organisation of programme provision.

The **Inputs** represent the resources from the external and internal environment. For example: FE learners and their learning experience at the college; FE staff and their effectiveness including accountability for the quality of teaching; the configuration of programmes and courses which make up the programme provision.

The **Processing** represents the process of interpreting a range of internal and external elements that impact on programme decision-making. For example: the creation of a strategic framework detailing organisation of programme provision; the role of senior leaders and managers; accountability and the quality improvements that should be in place.

The **Outputs** represent the work of the FE college programme provision system that is exported back into the FE environment. Three significant examples of outputs are identified. Firstly, the programme provision which includes programmes and courses offered by the college. Secondly, the performance or effectiveness of the programme provision. Thirdly, the learners graduating from FE colleges including those who do not successfully complete their studies and their progression to relevant employment or further studies. Learners' views when exiting their programme would also form part of the outputs.

The **Feedback** represents a continuing source of information concerning the performance or effectiveness of the FE college programme provision. This element of the framework delineates how information is used with the internal and external environment and plays an important part in programme decision-making. Three examples are identified. Firstly, education policies such as feedback on qualification reforms that impact on the college programme provision. Secondly, quality assurance checks and audits by regulatory bodies including funding agencies and Ofsted.Thirdly, feedback on the performance of the college programme provision by groups that have legitimacy of accountability (Hodgson, 2015) including by learners, employees, parents, governors and employers.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.0. Introduction

This chapter provides a discussion on the methodological approach undertaken from setting up the research questions to collecting and analysing the data. The main objective was to explore the structure of the enquiry and why particular research methods were selected to demonstrate engagement in a valid study.

The chapter starts with a discussion of the aim of the study which identifies the research questions (RQs). The research strategy section follows, and this sets out the rationale for using the case study methodology. The suitability of qualitative research is then presented, followed by the design and implementation section which focuses on the stages of the research and what was involved. The data collection section describes the methodology used to collect data, followed by a section on the process of data analysis. An explanation of the validity and ethical considerations of the research is then presented and discusses the checks used to ensure credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability of the study.

3.1. The aim of the study

The aim of the research was to analyse programme decision-making in FE colleges in England. My goal was to achieve this aim by answering these RQs:

i. *What are the internal and external factors that affect programme offer in an FE college?*
ii. *How do these factors affect programme decision-making and why?*
iii. *What are the consequences and impacts of programme decision-making on FE colleges?*

The three RQs helped to determine the most appropriate methods for analysing programme decision-making and in doing so focussed on the practice of such phenomenon. Educational research must be linked to practice because education is practical (Hart, 2012). The awareness of how practice emerges in different contexts and thus enables other researchers or practitioners to evaluate their own experience in their own setting against which has been described, is noteworthy when doing educational research (Dunne et al, 2005; Yin, 2009). In addition, the RQs informed the research outcomes presented in the Findings chapter and appraised the discussions presented in the Discussion chapter.

Research and literature on FE colleges has revealed significant gaps on programme decision-making in the FE sector. Thus, I recognise that my study could contribute towards increasing our knowledge and understanding of this practice at leadership and management levels. The ability of research to extend knowledge and develop further lines of action to cultivate a deeper sense of understanding (Anderson, 1990), is applicable to the subject of my research.

3.2. The research strategy: case study methodology

Literature states that the right research strategy must be used for the findings, conclusions and associated claims to be considered credible (Flyvbjerg, 2006). To answer the RQs, there was a compelling desire to develop an in-depth understanding of programme decision-making. The real-world context of the study,

using different colleges, justifies the use of case study as a research strategy. Such approach would fulfil the scope of the study and provide an enhanced understanding of programme decision-making in FE colleges.

3.2.1. Clarifying the term 'case study'

Whilst Dillon and Reid (2004) argue that the term 'case study' has lost its clarity in educational research by being used in a multitude of different contexts, Flyvbjerg (2006) counters that the case study method:

> *"can provide a unique wealth of information because one obtains various perspectives and conclusions on the case according to how it is viewed and interpreted"* (p.15).

Stake (2000, p.6) gives a broad description and proposes that:

> *"case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances."*

The key idea is to include everything related to that particular case, regardless of the nature of the case, be it a person or an organisation. Case studies enable the research topic to be studied "*in situ"* (Stark and Torrance, 2005, p.33), holistically and in its natural context (Yin, 2003). Specific focus on the 'how' and the 'why' is afforded as it *"allows tailoring the design and data collection procedures to the research questions"* (Meyer 2001, p.330). Furthermore, Yin (2003, p.1) adds that:

> *"…case studies are the preferred strategy when 'how' and 'why' questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context*".

The debate on whether case study is a methodology (Lotz-Sisitka and Raven, 2004) or a method (Stake, 2000) when defining its use in research, has occupied some literature. Thomas (2011) acknowledges that many authors (see also George and Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2009; Simons, 2009) have contributed to different categorisations of cases according to their purposes, types and implementation. Simons (2009, p.21) concludes that what unites the different attempts to define case study is the notion that:

> *"case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a 'real-life' context."*

Simons' (2009) definition of case study appropriately summarises the applicability of the methodology to my research as I analysed programme decision-making. Interestingly, Thomas (2011, p.512) urges us to refer to the 'case study approaches' by suggesting that "*case study should not be seen as a method in and of itself* [but as] *a design frame that may incorporate a number of methods"*. The argument is that by referring to the case study approaches, the risks of misinterpreting their power by linking them to a methodology are reduced. I have referred to both case study approaches and methodology from hereon.

3.2.2. Justifying the case study methodology to analyse programme decision-making

In this section, I provided a robust explanation of the case study methodology that shows understanding of the ideas and concepts used and explained what they mean in relation to my research. Having used authors whose work in the field has been reviewed to define what case study is, I concluded that the case study approaches are well suited to analysing programme decision-making.

In previous chapters, I discussed how FE colleges in England operate in a complex educational environment. The case study approaches afforded me the opportunity to analyse the complex practical processes of programme decision-making in FE colleges. Thus, by examining the "*complex interactions"* of the internal and external "*events* [and] *instances"* (Thomas, 2011, p.512), the phenomenon of programme decision-making was unpacked and studied using the case study methodology.

The opportunities presented by the case study approaches to talk to the principals, vice principals and curriculum managers in their own setting, assisted in understanding programme decision-making in FE colleges. This group of FE leaders and managers provided a rich source of information that threw light on the processes and underlying reasons for programme decision-making. From a researcher's perspective, I was not able to affect programme decision-making in the FE colleges taking part in the study. Therefore, the case study methodology fits the conditions, ideas and concepts outlined by Yin (2003). As Yin (2003) acknowledges, the coverage of a broad range of contextual and other complex conditions ensures that case study research goes beyond the study of isolated variables.

Corroboration of evidence: strengthening the case study methodology

The case study research is known as a triangulated research strategy. Researchers use the process of triangulation to increase the validity of their data by exploring a question using as many different techniques for collecting data as are required to reduce researcher bias. In this research, I collected data using interview techniques (see section 3.5.1) and relevant college documents. The role of the college documents was as stimulus for questions and corroboration of answers and was not as a separate analysis of documentary evidence. Furthermore, by interviewing the principals, vice principals and curriculum managers, triangulation was used to gain different perspectives on programme decision-making. I am not making a claim that the 'correct' management of programmes in FE can be made solely from the principal, vice principal and curriculum managers, but this group of FE leaders and managers have the authoritative knowledge and play a significant role in managing decisions about programme provision in their organisation.

As a practitioner curriculum manager and part time Ofsted inspector, I understand programme provision in FE. As a doctoral researcher, in my quest for new knowledge, I was cognisant that such fresh learning and understanding can be generated by research processes that are designed to reduce bias and increase validity. To achieve this, care was taken to describe the steps undertaken at each stage of the research. Data validation was secured through corroboration of data

using multiple sources. This form of triangulation process strengthened my study and was in line with the assertion that triangulation is "*almost an essential prerequisite for the case study approach"* Thomas' (2011, p.68).

Case study allows in-depth data collection from multiple sources of information rich context (Cresswell, 1998; Denscombe, 1998). My research used case studies, interviews and relevant formal stakeholders' reports such as Ofsted reports, self-assessment reports (SARs) and strategic plans and in some instances the college websites to analyse the data. The explanatory and exploratory characteristics of using case study methodology were identified by Cresswell (1998) and Denscombe (1998) and supported by Saunders et al, (2007). In relation to the study, these features allowed me as the researcher to collect data from multiple sources and therefore increased the credibility of the findings and provided valid conclusions.

3.3. The suitability of qualitative research for programme decision-making

The analysis of programme decision-making involved the study and interpretation of people's experiences in FE colleges in England. The interpretive and naturalistic features of qualitative research are well documented (see Holloway, 1997; Bryman, 2004) as:

> *"a form of social inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live"* (Holloway, 1997, p.2).

It is through understanding individual events in light of their wider social context that interpretation becomes possible (Bryman, 2004).

Although several different approaches exist within the wider framework of qualitative research, the key objective, according to Holloway (1997), is to understand the social reality of individuals and groups. For my research, I focused on the contextualisation of the data that informed programme decision-making. My objective was to extract meaning as I took a holistic stance at the relationship between programme decision-making and the wider context of leadership for learning and for the management of programme provision in FE colleges.

The subjectivity and interpretive features of qualitative research approach support the constructivist paradigm which is based upon the idea of a socially constructed sense of reality (Searle, 1999). Three key elements are assumed: a relativist ontology where multiple realities exist; a subjectivist epistemology where the knower and subject create understanding and a naturalistic set of methodological procedures (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

By undertaking leadership and management activities, FE leaders and managers socially construct reality that contributes to the context of their college (as discussed in Chapter Two). Holloway (1997) justifies the use of qualitative research approach to study the construction of social reality by stating that, *"researchers use qualitative approaches to explore the behaviour, perspectives and experiences of the people they study"* (p.2). In relation to my thesis, this approach suited my research enquiry as I made sense of programme decision-

making in different FE colleges, from a standpoint of leadership, leadership for learning and management approaches to leading and managing programme provision.

3.3.1. Qualitative approaches, socially constructed realities and naturalised setting

Many authors including Sarantakos (1998), Searle (1999) and Gay et al, (2006) support the idea that because reality is socially constructed and subjective, research that uses qualitative approaches would facilitate the capturing of reality as experienced by those directly involved in their naturalised setting. Earlier research by Bogdan and Biklen (1992) reported such idea and identified that the researcher is the key player when qualitative research methodology is adopted. Holloway (1997, p.45) emphasises this point:

> *"Researchers must understand the socially constructed nature of the world and realise that values and interests become part of the research process".*

Assumptions of an epistemological nature are suggested. As the researcher for this study and as a curriculum manager and part time Ofsted inspector, my experience, knowledge and interests gave meaning to and supported the research process as well as affected my work in the thesis. It is not possible to separate ourselves from what we know and how we might begin to understand the world and communicate this as knowledge to fellow human beings (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). As such, I have focussed on the processes and underlying reasons (see Thomas, 2011) when analysing programme decision-making. Programme decision-making can be viewed as part of a process embedded within wider leadership in FE colleges. Interviews with the participants and documentary evidence captured the underlying reasons of programme decision-making to provide a credible and reliable study.

Conversely, Holloway (1997) acknowledges that qualitative methodology is not totally precise because the social world is not orderly or systematic and human beings do not always act logically or predictably. Therefore, as the researcher, I relied much on the participants for guidance, resulting in the advice *"that the researcher proceeds in a well-structured and systematic way for the research to be scientific"* (Holloway,1997, p.8). In section 3.5., I described how I applied Holloway's advice in the context of my research enquiry.

The notion that qualitative research benefits from the naturalised setting as the source for data research is not new and dates as far back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from the writings of Mead, Weber, Shutz and others (Holloway, 1997). Thus, I approached this study from a subjectivist epistemology and an interpretivist perspective armed with an awareness that the research participants (FE college leaders and managers) are, in the words of Holloway (1997, p.8) *"essentially context-bound…that is, they cannot be free from time and location".*

The considerations, ideas and concepts of case study as well as the qualitative research approach discussed, led to the conclusion that case study approaches were an appropriate methodology to use to analyse programme decision-making in FE colleges in England.

3.4. Design and implementation of the research

In this section, I defined the case for analysing programme decision-making in the three colleges to enable references to be made to the findings by the context of the college. Following background reading of many FE colleges, the selection for case studies was carefully chosen because the colleges had the potential to reveal relevant information to answer the RQs. For example, most of the programme provision of the three colleges was comparable. Furthermore, the participants held similar roles across the three different colleges and had the knowledge to give authoritative and accurate information about programme decision-making. To illustrate the findings, I drew on Thomas' (2011) approach to case study, described earlier, for the analysis of programme decision-making.

3.4.1. The selection of the further education colleges

One of the reasons for selecting the colleges was that most of their programme provisions were comparable so that a broad range of findings could be captured. For example, all three colleges offered programme provision in: engineering, construction, business administration and art and design. The departments were chosen because: their programme provisions provided opportunities and constraints which influenced the context of the college; they were managed by curriculum managers with the relevant authoritative knowledge about their programmes. The importance of selecting the appropriate, relevant and representative cases for the study for their validity is highlighted by advocates of case study approaches (Yin, 2003, Flyvbjerg, 2006, Thomas, 2011). The selection of colleges and their departments provided a broader picture of programme decision-making practices.

The FE colleges were also selected based on their most recent Ofsted report. This provided some evidence of the performance of the college programme provision and contributed to the selection of departments for the study. The Ofsted report often illustrated examples of provision performance at programme level and as such was used as a stimulus for questions as well as to corroborate some elements of the findings from the interviews and other relevant college documents such as the SAR, prospectus and strategic plan. Ofsted uses a four-point scale to make judgements on the effectiveness of FE colleges: Grade 1 (Outstanding); Grade 2 (Good); Grade 3 (Requires Improvement); Grade 4 (Inadequate) (see Ofsted CIF, 2016). Of the three FE colleges selected for this research enquiry, two were graded 'Good' and one 'Inadequate'. As identified in Chapter One, a considerable number of FE colleges were found to be 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate'. Ofsted uses the Common Inspection Framework (CIF) which set out the principles that apply to inspection and the main judgements that inspectors use when conducting inspections of all FE colleges in England (Ofsted CIF, 2016). In chapters One and Two, I interrogated the expectations that underlie the Ofsted framework (see Coffield, 2017) and how these have effects on different colleges in differing locales and contexts.

3.4.2. Selecting the location of colleges

There were two main reasons for selecting the FE colleges in the South West of England. First, it is the largest region of England and with over 25 FE colleges

(FindFE, 2015), provided a rich source of data to facilitate an informed analysis of programme decision-making. Of the three FE colleges selected for the case studies one is situated in a centre of the city, one in a very large town and the other one in a medium-sized town.

The second reason is that I live in the South West and within a convenient distance to facilitate access to interview the participants. However, I could have been perceived a threat, in terms of neighbouring competition as I am a curriculum manager in an FE college in the same region. This could be a disadvantage as I could have been seen to have access to potential competitors' programme information. To overcome this potential obstacle, I chose FE colleges that do not recruit students from my own college demographic area and these colleges are far enough in terms of distance and location so as not to be a threat to neighbouring competitors.

3.5. Data collection

Two methods of data collection using multiple data sources were used for this study. Semi-structured interviews were the primary method. The participants FE leaders and managers provided different perspectives on programme decision-making in their colleges. Data from the self-assessment reports (SARs), Ofsted reports, strategic plans, prospectus, mission and vision statements from each college provided stimuli for questions and corroboration of answers. The FE leaders and curriculum managers gave their full consent to use the college documents for this study (see Appendix B).

3.5.1. Rationale for interviews

Interviews provide "*access to the meanings that people attribute to their experiences and social worlds"* (Miller and Glassner, 2004, p.126). This view is consistent with the research ethics of treating FE college leaders and managers as experts in their own experience with regards to programme decision-making. Marshall and Rossman (1995, p.80) argue that in-depth interviewing "*is a data collection method relied on quite extensively by qualitative researchers*". Through interviewing, valuable data on programme decision-making was gathered in a moderate period, by allowing the interviewees to participate at ease in the comfort of their work environment. This is in line with Marshall and Rossman's (1995) view on how crucial it is for the interviewees to be willing subjects and comfortable in sharing their data and information. Moreover, the face-to-face interviews allowed me to observe any body language as well as voice tone (Cohen et al, 2003).

In the remainder of this section, I discussed the three most common types of interviews: structured, semi-structured and unstructured and their suitability for this research.

Structured interviews

In structured interviews, the interviewer asks each respondent the same sets of questions. Structured interviews encompass tight control over the format of the questions and answers, thus facilitating the collection of large volumes of data from a wide range of respondents (Denscombe, 1998). Consequently, a structured interview does not allow for development of points raised by the interviewee, nor is the interviewer allowed to offer his/her opinion, and therefore

plays a neutral role in the interview (Denscombe, 1998). For these reasons, I did not use this interview method.

Furthermore, Yin (2009), suggests that a structured interview is used when the interviewer has a well-developed understanding of the topic at hand, enabling the researcher to create a highly-structured interview guide to capture responses and gain adequate understanding of the topic. Whilst I accept that I have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the research topic at programme management level, I am not entirely familiar with decision-making at senior leadership level. For this additional reason, a structured interview approach was not employed.

Unstructured interviews

Unstructured interviews allow both interviewer and interviewee to engage in a formal interview. In general, the interviewer has developed sufficient understanding of the topic to have a clear agenda for discussion with the interviewee but remains open to having his or her understanding of the topic to be further developed.

However, two key limitations of unstructured interviews are identified. First, the interview can be time-consuming (Yin, 2009). The researcher's role is less intrusive and allows the interviewee to use their own words and develop their own thoughts. Second, there is a likelihood that very little data might be generated because the researcher needs to speak with the interviewee often and on multiple occasions as his/her understanding of the topic is still evolving (Denscombe, 1998). The participants in my research had limited amount of time to spare. They were busy professionals engaged in the daily routine of running their colleges. As mentioned earlier, my knowledge of the research topic at senior leadership level was limited. Consequently, the unstructured interview approach was discarded.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviewing offers more flexibility than structured and unstructured interviews, enabling the researcher and the interviewee to explore emergent themes and ideas (Cohen et al, 2003; Yin, 2009). I conducted semi-structured interviews with the principals, vice principals and curriculum managers. The interviews provided the data for primary data analysis. To protect the anonymity of the colleges, I used pseudonyms such as College A, B and C as a means for their identification. Furthermore, I have anonymised each participant according to the pseudonym of their college as shown in Table 1. The remainder of this section discusses the rationale for using semi-structured interviews.

FE College	Position	Reference code
College A	Principal/Chief Executive Officer	P-A
	Vice Principal of Curriculum and Operations	VP-A
	Curriculum Manager A1 Curriculum Manager A2	CM-A1 CM-A2
College B	Principal	P-B
	Vice Principal	VP-B
	Curriculum Manager B1 Curriculum Manager B2	CM-B1 CM-B2
College C	Principal	P-C
	Vice Principal	VP-C
	Curriculum Manager C1 Curriculum Manager C2	CM-C1 CM-C2

Table 1: Further education (FE) college research participants

Denscombe (1998, p.113) states that semi-structured interviews enable, "*the interviewee to develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised by the researcher".* As the researcher I had a list of open-ended questions, based on the RQs, to follow as a guide which also helped to engage in the conversation when appropriate. The main advantage was that the questions provided a clear set of instructions for me as the interviewer and in return secured reliable, comparable qualitative data. Cohen et al (2003) support the view that semi-structured permutations of open and closed interrogations generate opportunities for interviewees to express themselves as well as allow the interviewer to review and elucidate meanings and possible misinterpretations. Consequently, the semi-structured interviews facilitated access to greater breadth and depth of responses to the research questions.

Rubin and Rubin (2004, p.15) refer to semi-structured interviews as responsive interviewing "*because researchers respond to and ask further questions about what they hear from the interviewees rather than rely exclusively on predetermined questions".* The use of open-ended questions could have presented a distraction as I could have strayed from the interview guide. However, this did not happen as the semi-structured approach provided the flexibility and the opportunity to identify new ways of understanding programme decision-making. The order and the number of questions asked varied, depending on the college context and interviewee responses. For these reasons, the semi-structured interview approach was adopted in this study.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with FE leaders and managers. The information obtained from the three different levels of leaders and managers (see Table 1) allowed for detailed exploration of the college programme provision. Twelve interviews were conducted on location at individual colleges. Interviews with the principal allowed access to data and information on programme decision-making at strategic leadership level. Interviews with the vice principal allowed the corroboration of data gathered from the principal level so that different perspectives could be gained on programme decision-making. Interviews with the curriculum managers allowed access to data and information on programme decision-making at programme and course operational and implementation levels. Furthermore, the interviews across all levels provided different perspectives on management approaches to leading and managing programme provision.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted between February 2015 and April 2016. The open-ended questions were developed and based on an initial pilot of interviews with an ex-Principal, an ex-Vice Principal and two curriculum managers of two FE colleges in the South West of England. The focus was on leadership for learning and what management approaches were taken in terms leading and managing these programmes.

The interview processes

I interviewed the twelve interviewees on an individual basis. Eight interviewees were contacted with supplementary questions after the interview to gain further detailed information about specific areas of their programme provision. For example, I asked for progression and destination data for learner from the last two years. This request provided additional information on learners' progression and supported how leaders and managers use available data and information to assist with programme decision-making. On average each interview took approximately 2 hours 15 minutes, but the range was substantial (between 2 to 2 ½ hours). The interview process involved each interviewee outlining their role, followed by an overview of their college including the range of programme provision they offer. The remainder of the interviews explored the following areas:

i. *What are the internal and external factors that affect programme offer in an FE college?* The interviewees were encouraged to explain their programme provision within the context of their college.
ii. *How do these factors affect programme decision-making and why?* The interviewees were asked to give practical examples to elaborate and illustrate the management practice and implementation of programme decision-making from a leadership and management of programme provision perspective.
iii. *What are the consequences and impacts of programme decision-making on FE colleges?* The interviewees were asked to explain how different factors (internal and external to the college) and other challenges affect programme decision-making.

The data capture method used during each interview was audio recording rather than taking notes, enabling me to listen to the responses with minimal distraction. The interviewees felt at ease using this mode of data capture because they were made aware of the semi-structured questions and lines of enquiry ahead of the interview (see Appendix B). The importance of developing a good rapport and dialogue with the interviewee in semi-structured interviews is endorsed by Cohen et al (2011). After the interview, each interviewee was sent the written transcripts to check and verify the accuracy of their responses. All interviewees agreed for their quotes to be used in this study.

3.5.2. Rationale for college documentary evidence

The descriptive, comparative and exploratory nature of the study meant that the data sources from relevant college documents provided stimuli for questions and corroboration of answers before, during and after the interviews.

The Ofsted reports, SARs, strategic plans, prospectus, mission and vision statements provided documentary evidence which ensured this research does not solely rely on interview data. The documents were scrutinised so that objective assumptions from the interview data could be made. Before the interviews, these

documents provided a means of setting the enquiry in context, supporting the formulation of interview questions and exploring further lines of enquiry. During the interviews, the documents assisted with the questioning and clarification of information. After the interviews, the documents were used to corroborate the responses from the participants. Ofsted reports for all education providers in England are available on the World Wide Web and therefore are readily accessible to the public. Ofsted carries out inspection and makes judgement on the effectiveness of programme provision as part of inspecting and regulating education and training services that care for learners of all ages. For this study, I used the most recent Ofsted report for each of the three FE colleges.

Self-Assessment Report (SAR) evaluates the performance of the college programme provision. This annual report is the outcome of a cyclical reflective process and in most FE colleges, the SAR uses the Ofsted Common Inspection Framework (CIF) criteria as guidelines. SARs often include: programme provision performance; effectiveness of leadership and management; teaching, learning and assessment and outcomes for learners. Even though most FE colleges produce a SAR, they are under no contractual obligation to do so. However, senior leaders are expected to submit their college programme performance data, as part of the central management information data, to the Learning and Skills Gateway which is part of the Department of Education (D*f*E).

The three colleges participating in this study provided a copy of their recent SAR and strategic plan. These documents were treated with utmost sensitivity because unlike Ofsted reports they are not for public view. Other relevant documents such as the college prospectus, vision and mission statements were also sources of information that made important contributions to the preparation of the interview questions as well as to further corroborate the responses from the participants.

3.6. Data analysis

When analysing substantial amounts of collected data, it is important to have a strategy to help build an understanding of a phenomenon (Patton, 2002). The recordings from the interviews were replayed many times and transcribed on a word processor. I read the written transcripts several times and selected the responses, list of terms and phrases descriptions that conveyed the FE leader's and managers' practice of programme decision-making in their college setting. These were organised, grouped and labelled into emergent themes and sub-themes depicting how, what, when and why programme decision-making happens at leadership and management organisational levels.

A detailed analysis for each college was carried out against the themes and sub-themes supported by quotes from interview responses and supporting documentary evidence. In some instances, sub-sub-themes were identified to further categorise the factors that influence programme decision-making. I wanted to gain a better understanding of the knowledge and practices the individual FE leaders and managers brought to the programme decision-making process in their college. Specifically, it was important to gauge different perspectives on management approaches to leading and managing programme provision.

3.7. Credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability

Each of these concepts is applicable to an aspect of the overall credibility of qualitative research and shapes the framework for determining the rigour of the research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Miles and Huberman, 1994). However, there is some contention in the literature about how credibility can be evaluated in qualitative research (Flyvbjerg, 2006). As the researcher I must be able to defend the content of my thesis and demonstrate full understanding of the implications and context of its main findings (EdD Guidelines, 2012). Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to a range of practices that can be used to carry out qualitative research that achieves credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability.

3.7.1. Credibility

To achieve confidence in the truth of the findings, I employed a range of techniques to establish credibility of my study. For example, a significant amount of time was dedicated to interviewing 12 FE leaders and managers to gain an understanding and depth of programme decision-making from different perspectives. Each college operates within its own context. It was necessary to ask supplementary questions both during and after the interviews to probe further into the participants' practice and management of programme decision-making to elicit reliable data. For example, as the leadership for learning theme emerged, I structured my questions to elicit the information needed to answer the RQs. In doing so, this helped in ensuring robust responses to consolidate credibility of my study.

I consider being familiar with some aspects of programme decision-making an asset. Such familiarity afforded me some practical experience of the research topic and increased my confidence as a researcher to ask more pertinent questions when interviewing the participants. Earlier, I described how I used data and information from the college documents to corroborate that obtained from the interviews, thus ensuring the findings are robust and well developed.

3.7.2. Dependability

The concept of dependability refers to how stable the data are or the consistency of the enquiry processes over a period of time (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The close ties between credibility and dependability means that in practice the former goes some way in ensuring the latter.

I have achieved dependability in my study by ensuring the data I collected about the colleges is stable and trustworthy. Data gained from interviewing across three different levels of leadership and management of each college and corroborating their responses with the relevant college documents, ensured the findings were consistent and consolidated the dependability of the study. The trustworthiness of a study that uses qualitative approaches is linked to the notion of dependability to show that the findings are consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Yin, 2003; Flyvbjerg, 2006). The interpretative judgements of the case study approach mean that the readers of my research will be able to discern how my judgements have been reached. The details of my reflexivity, related to the research design and implementation of the study, also support how dependability of this research enquiry was achieved.

During the study, FE college C merged with another college, causing a change in the setting and the context of the college. However, this did not affect the findings because I had already completed the interviews and had accessed the relevant documents. The change in context for College C means that this part of the study cannot be repeated. However, the stability of the data, obtained before the merger, is maintained because future researchers can repeat the work using the same evidence-based data that I used, therefore demonstrating dependability of my study. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) specify, to meet the dependability criterion in qualitative research, researchers should strive to enable future investigators to repeat the study.

3.7.3. Transferability and sample size

Transferability

The quality of the study may be judged on the degree to which the findings have applicability to other FE colleges in England. Using thick description (see also Lincoln and Guba, 1985), I thoroughly described the context of the colleges to facilitate the extent to which the conclusions drawn are transferable to other colleges in similar settings and situations. In addition, the careful selection of the colleges, the participants and the departments increased the ability of my research to be applicable to other FE colleges of similar setting. The case study approach offers the opportunity for "*naturalistic generalisation"* (Stark and Torrance, 2005, p.34). As the authors (p.34) further assert, practitioners in similar contexts can *"recognise aspects of their own situation and experience in the case and intuitively generalise from that case".* The themes I have identified and discussed resonate with the experience and understanding of the issues faced by anyone who researches or works in FE colleges. Therefore, the strengths of the themes which generated the internal and external factors are applicable to wider FE colleges, locality and contexts.

Sample size

I consider that the number of FE colleges and participants in the study was sufficient. The colleges have provided a robust set of stable and relevant data and information and any additional colleges would have added very little data to the existing research. Guest et al (2006) used the term 'saturation' to describe the notion that more data does not necessarily lead to more information. For my study, I interviewed 12 people who occupy similar roles in each of the three different FE colleges and each possessed appropriate authoritative knowledge. As key informants of programme decision-making in their colleges, their roles are described in Appendix D.

In each college, I interviewed two curriculum managers in addition to the principal and vice-principal. The programme provision they manage in their department and their roles and responsibilities were broadly similar across the case studies (see Appendix D) and this further maximised the achievement of dependability of my study. In doing so, I gained triangulation through capturing the different perspectives on management approaches to managing programme provision. Furthermore, the three colleges provided sufficient contribution to the way I conceptualised the evidence for analysing programme decision-making. The colleges provided "*context-dependent knowledge*" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p.4) which

allows for the development of in-depth understanding of programme decision-making.

3.7.4. Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent of neutrality to which the results of the study are formed by the participants and not by researcher bias, motivation or interest (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). For my study, confirmability was achieved and strengthened by engaging three academic critical friends (see Acknowledgement) who read my thesis at various stages, commented on my research process and questioned my interpretations. Their views, as well as ensuring that my representations are not merely figments of my imagination (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) also helped to address potential biasness. References to literature also contributed to strengthening confirmability of my study. By accepting my interpretation and analysis of their interviews, documentary evidence and college context, the FE leaders and managers involved in the study also strengthened confirmability of my study.

3.8. Ethical considerations

The Council of the British Educational Research Association (BERA), *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (2011) states that all educational research should be conducted with the highest ethical standards and promote respect for all those engage with the research. This study was conducted within the principles underpinning the guidelines which states that:

> "*the Association considers that all educational research should be conducted within an ethic of respect for: The Person, Knowledge, Democratic Values, The Quality of Educational Research and Academic Freedom*" (BERA, 2011, p.4).

These principles were at the heart of my research approach during all stages of the enquiry. In addition, throughout the study, I adhered to the three Rs: Responsibility, Rigor and Respect, in line with the Research Ethics Guidelines for EdD students (University of Bath, Post Graduate Skills Record (on-line), as set by BERA, 2011).

Cohen et al (2011) identify three key ethical considerations that should be undertaken throughout the entire process of the research: ethical considerations that should pervade the whole process of research; informed consent of participants (see also BERA, 2011), confidentiality and the consequences and risks associated with participation. These guidelines were adhered to throughout the study. Specifically, the following three ethical questions from Cohen et al, (2011, p.292) were adhered to during the research in order to meet the highest ethical standard and prevent any ethical harm:

a) Has the informed consent of the interviewees been gained?
b) Have the confidentiality, anonymity, non-identifiability and non-traceability been guaranteed?
c) What has been done to ensure that the interview is conducted in an appropriate, non-stressful, non-threatening manner?

3.8.1. Ethical approval

Consent

At the beginning of the study, I invited the FE leaders and managers to participate in the study (see Appendix A). All the participants confirmed their consent and I wrote to them again with a detailed outline of my study (see Appendix B). They were informed of the aim of the research, the purpose of the interview, how the information would be gathered and stored in accordance to BERA (2011). The participants were ensured confidentiality and anonymity with a *"promise that you will not be identified or presented in identifiable form"* (Sapsford and Jupp (1998, p.319). They were informed that the recording and transcripts would be stored on a password protected area of a secure server and were assured that the data will not be used against them or their organisation. Prior to conducting the interviews, I contacted the interviewees again to check that they were still happy to participate in my study and to arrange a convenient date and time for the interview. The participants were given the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Voluntary participation was therefore sought and obtained.

Confidentiality and anonymity

During the recorded interviews, the interviewees were guaranteed confidentiality with a promise that all information provided by the college participants will be treated in the strictest confidence. They were assured that upon conclusion of the research all findings would be reported only in an anonymous format (see pseudonyms used in Table 1) protect the identity of both the college and the interviewees. As Cohen et al (2011, p.62) maintain, confidentiality "…*is the extent to which investigators keep faith with those who have helped them*". Additionally, to ensure further anonymity, I kept the exact geographical location of the colleges unidentified throughout the thesis.

Issues of anonymity and confidentiality can arise and present problems when presenting the findings (Bell, 2005). As such it was essential to take steps to avoid the possibilities of the "*research subjects involved in the study to identify each other in the final presentation of the research"* (Tolich 2004, p.101). It is likely that my final thesis could be accessible on line. In the words of Floyd and Arthur (2010, p.8) "*whatever efforts are made to preserve anonymity, a simple on-line search will allow the most novice investigator to identify the institution*". Therefore, as a responsible researcher, I have taken steps to ensure the interviewees are not identifiable. By referring to principal, vice principal and curriculum managers I have been consistent when referring to the job title of the participants even though these were different in each college.

Conduct of interview

The interviewees were willing subjects and comfortable in sharing their perspectives regarding leading and managing programme provision. The interviews were carried out on location at individual colleges enabling the interviewees to participate at ease in the comfort of their work environment. The interviews were not pressured or non-threatening at any point and where it was felt necessary, allowances were made for follow-up to take place to clarify some questions. By adopting a measured interview technique as the researcher, I ensured the interview itself was not compromised.

3.9. Summary

Methodology is the acid test of any research. Other researchers should be able to understand what is being researched, why and how the research was carried out and be able to replicate the enquiry.

The fundamental point taken from the understanding of case study as a valid research approach is in its holistic nature, thus enabling the study of programme decision-making in its natural FE college contexts. I adopted an interpretative approach to my research enquiry. To address the challenges that may have threatened the rigour of the study, I carefully selected three case studies, each containing three levels of leaders and managers, with authoritative knowledge about their college programme provision, thus enabling common themes to be identified. These leaders and managers provided different perspectives of the data gathered during interviews and contributed towards triangulation. Information from the collection of relevant documents from each college provided stimuli for questions and corroboration of answers before, during and after the interviews. I carried out the study in a respectful manner and adhered to ethical validity throughout the research.

As a professional educator, I am adept at carrying out self-reflexivity which I used as a valuable resource to increase my knowledge on the practice of programme decision-making in FE colleges. In the words of Flyvbjerg (2006, p.6), "*cases are important for researchers' own learning processes in developing the skills needed to do good research".* The ability to self-reflect strengthened my learning and understanding during the research process as strongly advocated by interpretivist supporters (Angen, 2000) and experts on case study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Yin 2003; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

In the next chapter I present the findings, reporting on the three colleges in terms of themes and sub-themes in response to the RQs.

Chapter Four: The Findings

4.0. Introduction

Grouped into themes, sub-themes and where appropriate, sub-sub-themes this chapter presents the findings identified during the study. Data collected through interviews with senior leaders and managers are presented. Furthermore, data from numerous sources of college documents, such as self-assessment reports (SAR), Ofsted reports, prospectuses, vision and mission statements, were used because they provide rich sources of documentary evidence to stimulate questions during the interviews as well as corroborate the findings.

4.1. Emergent themes and sub-themes

This section presents the main findings that emerged during the data collection process. Based on the analysis of the data, programme decision-making in FE colleges is a complex educational process that has features which can be broadly categorised into three themes and significant sub-themes.

i. *Theme 1: The FE College context. Sub-themes: strategic framework; financial status; programme performance*

Within the findings, the study discovered that the context of FE colleges is shaped by three key focuses: strategic planning of programme provision operating within a strategic framework; the financial status of the college, driven predominantly by education funding policies and the performance of the programme provision. In establishing the context of their college, leaders and managers use the opportunities and constraints presented by the key focuses to make decisions about their programme provision. Themes 2 and 3 emerged from leaders' and managers' perceptions and experiences of the context of their college.

ii. *Theme 2: The stakeholders. Sub-themes: learners' experience and views; engagement with employees and employers*

Senior leaders and managers recognise the role learners, teachers and employers play, as key stakeholders, in the programme decision-making process. This observation was particularly noted in relation to under-performing courses. The role of local and regional employers is significant when leaders and managers undertake programme decision-making.

iii. *Theme 3: The role of senior leaders and managers. Sub-themes: strategic leadership; accountability; quality improvement capability*

The skills and effectiveness of the leadership and management team are crucial in shaping college strategies and its priorities. Senior leaders and managers recognise the need to fully understand their roles and responsibilities, encompassing accountability of curriculum performance. Primarily, the study reveals that the dynamics of the three themes shape how and why strategic leadership is important in programme decisions-making.

In the next section, the findings are organised and grouped into the three FE colleges that participated in the study.

4.2. Further education College A

4.2.1. Background

College A is a medium-sized FE college located in the centre of an affluent city in the south-west of England. The college was judged ‘Good’ by Ofsted in 2013 and was praised for good learner outcomes, quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and effectiveness of leadership and management. The college is situated in an area known for its strong capabilities in the creative and engineering industries: arts, crafts, media, design, computer software, architecture and engineering. The retail, tourism, financial and professional business sectors also make very significant contributions to the local economy. The programme provision offered by College A reflects the needs of the community it serves.

The college prospectus and website outline programme provision in the following areas: care, hospitality, computing, business and administration, art and design, engineering and construction. 16-to-18-year-olds on study programme make up approximately 84% of the college learner numbers. The self-assessment report (SAR-2014/15) for College A identified two key areas that directly underpin the programme provision it offers. First, the college rated ‘outstanding’ its engagement with employers, namely in arts, engineering and hospitality, and in the development of its vision and strategy. Second, it rated ‘excellent’ its partnership with the Local Enterprise Partners (LEP). Collaborating with the LEPs and employers in engineering and hospitality ensured the college was appropriately positioned to support a wide range of economic and community initiatives. The leaders and managers interviewed for this study acknowledged these two strong positions.

For ease of reading, the following abbreviations are used: P-A: Principal; VP-A: Vice Principal; CM-A1 and CM-A2 are curriculum managers for construction and engineering and business administration, art and design programme provisions.

4.2.2. Theme 1: Further education college context (College A)

Opportunities and constraints (College A)

Opportunities

College A turned an essential cornerstone 3 years ago, when it took the decision to stop running its ‘A’ level provision. The decision was taken at strategic level following poor performance. The leaders saw this as an opportunity to use the college strategic framework to redefine the college’s mission and to focus on programmes that offer technical and professional qualifications that train students and develop their skills for the world of work. The college uses its well-established good links and partnership with significant employers in engineering, business administration, art and design and hospitality trades, to improve vocational training for its learners, therefore creating a talent pool for local employers.

Constraints

The findings categorise three key constraints that inform the context of College A. First, the funding policies and practice imposed by central government has a major impact on the financial viability of the college and consequently on programme

decision-making. The college uses this constraint to closely monitor class sizes to ensure the courses they run are viable. Second, is the acknowledgement that there are small pockets of poor quality teaching and learning at the college which result in poor learner experience. Third, and also linked to the latter constraint, is the lack of accountability of programme performance in a small minority of provision leading to programme underperformance.

The role of strategic planning (College A)

Strategic framework

Senior leaders acknowledged that whilst course viability and achievement rates are considered when making programme decisions, at the most strategic level, all decisions take place within the strategic framework:

> *P-A: "…it's absolutely essential that the college has in place a strategy that serves the framework that all decisions can be made against. For instance, if we have in our strategic framework a priority to grow provision X, Y and Z and someone comes along and say can we grow A, B or C, we should be sticking to our strategy and say, no it's not actually in our strategy. We won't take that course of action."*

The shift from the traditional 'A levels' to a more vocational provision was a deliberate strategic decision and presented the college with an opportunity to realign its programme provision to meet the needs of local and regional employers.

Financial status (College A)

Leaders and managers provided evidence that they have no choice but to comply with government funding policies and demands. The Principal was clear about the impact on the financial sustainability of the college programme provision:

> *P-A: "We are funded through the public purse. We've got the government framework as well as our own strategic framework to work from. If your own strategic plan does not align with what the government will pay for, you will never be able to deliver your strategic plan. So, the first hurdle to overcome is the funding and financial aspects of it."*

The Vice Principal offered further evidence of meeting the funding policy demands and the impact on programme decision-making:

> *VP-A: "Going back many years when the very traditional adult learning courses, the Art and Design craft base, the hobby courses were being funded, we had to strip these courses out because they were no longer being funded. We had huge outcry from the community because they could no longer do a course in drawing for £10 year."*

The Principal noted that the college is successfully engaged in providing a range of Art and Design craft-based courses at full cost. These courses do not draw

government funding but given the affluent location of College A, there is a demand for these courses and learners pay the appropriate fees. Full cost courses are only run if class numbers are viable and they sufficiently cover all course costs. The strategic decision made to offer these courses at full cost was a high risk but one which has paid off. The Principal stated that the Art and Design programme is run by one of the college's outstanding and most successful curriculum departments.

The Vice Principal explained the challenges of funding policies on programme decision-making. He reported that two years ago, College A took the decision to stop offering the Heritage Conservation stonemasonry course:

> *VP-A: "Where funding is removed, that is the death knells for a lot courses. Take the Heritage stonemasonry course: that had to be dropped because funding was removed and made it impossible to offer. Therefore, you look for alternatives. But it is a big decision day when you say a course is not going to be offered anymore."*

Evidence of the effect of meeting the government funding policy demands at various levels in the organisation, was provided by one of the curriculum managers. He confirmed the impact of withdrawing the Heritage Conservation stonemasonry course from the college programme provision:

> *CM-A2: "This* [Heritage Conservation stonemasonry course] *was a viable course with good student numbers and a good performance record. All learners progressed to relevant employment in the stonemasonry industry because the course developed their practical skills. But as the course was no longer funded by the government, students couldn't afford the £900 fee. The stonemasonry team which consisted of three lecturers was at risk and one lecturer was made redundant. It was a stressful experience for the whole team."*

So far, I have provided evidence that programme decisions are made at strategic level and consider whether course group sizes are viable and/or have the ability to draw funding from various government funding agencies. Evidence from the college SAR-2014/15 corroborates and states the "*schematic and rigorous monitoring of the financial health of the College"* by the governing body, results in "*progressive development of the College resources in accord with the Strategic Objectives."* The SAR-2014/15 endorses the supportive role of the governing body in setting *"clear and strong focus on strategy and key issues for the college."* Furthermore, "*[There is] effective and robust oversight and scrutiny by the Corporation of financial performance ensures the College is able to meet the needs of local economies and communities."*

Programme performance (College A)

Close monitoring of programme performance encompassing learners' recruitment, retention, achievements and progression, demonstrated that the outcomes for learners were rated good as confirmed by the college SAR-2014/15. The link between the financial viability and the efficiency of the programme provision was a recurrent sub-theme that made up the context of College A:

> *P-A: "There is a strong correlation between the financial performance and the type of programme provision the college offers. The provision that performs the worse is often the most poorly performing from a financial perspective."*

The Principal believes that the low retention of learners as they drop out of poorly performing courses is one of the most common signs of a failing programme. Early intervention was cited as a remedy for ensuring a healthy programme.

> *P-A: "Often the reason why a programme fails is that issues arise, and people have not spotted them early enough. The senior leadership team should focus on the quality of teaching, learning and the management of the course that is under-performing."*

The college Ofsted (2015b, p.3) report indicates that through a successful programme quality improvement strategy, leaders and managers have raised the standards and outcomes for learners and:

> *"…brought together performance management, continuing professional development and observations of teaching and learning, resulting in better teaching, learning and assessment across the college."*

Outcomes for learners

The college self-assessment report (SAR-2014/15) lists overall success rates of: 88% for its 16-18-year-old learners on study programmes, 76% for apprenticeship and 87% for the adult provision. 81% of learners pass their GCSE English and 76% for mathematics. These outcomes for learners compare favourably to the success of learners in similar providers. The SAR states that overall, 72% of learners progressed to relevant employment. Progression data on learners' destination indicates a high proportion progress to employment. Most students who do not progress to employment move on to higher education.

4.2.3. Theme 2: The stakeholders (College A)

The findings indicate that the effectiveness of the programme provision is based on three key sub-themes: learners, teachers and increasingly local employers as stakeholders.

Learners as stakeholders (College A)

Leaders and managers acknowledge the value of learners' voice and take their views into account when making decisions about programme offer and programme management:

> *P-A: "Often when a provision is on the decline, students, through learners' voice, are the ones to tell us. If you have a provision that does not have a good employment outcomes or good number of engagement/links with employers, it becomes quite a bland course - delivered by syllabus rather than in a meaningful way and learners are not engaged."*

The Ofsted (2015b, p.4) report provides further evidence of learner views in programme management:

> *"The college has been innovative in using the views of students to improve teaching, learning and assessment, such as through training and reference to students when making decisions about the appointment of staff."*

The impact of learner voice is further evidenced by the following comment in the SAR-2014/15:

> *"Reviews were carried out in all* [programme] *areas. As part of this process 10 learner voice feedback sessions took place over five weeks, during which 97 learners from the programme areas under review talked to members of the observations team and Governors and offered their views on aspects of their experience as learners at the College".*

Two common themes emerged from learners' feedback: some lessons are boring, and learners are not stretched; there are limited practical activities in some sessions. Several actions were put in place and incorporated into staff development activities and planning for improvements.

Attention is paid to learners' expectations and their progress as well as what they say about their study programme. Consequently, learners' view played a key role in the review of the Business programme provision delivered by College A:

> *VP-A: "The Business provision poorly performed last year. It was down to the low level of aspirations and the low expectations of the students set by the college – in other words - dull teaching."*

Actions that were put in place to address the problem included special intervention measures such as close monitoring of the performance of the Business provision:

> *VP-A: We put that whole suite of programme into a special review. We knew that if that did not work we were going to cut the Business provision and that would be horrendous for a FE college. The special review took up to 4 months to effect. There were 10 lines of enquiry focussing on learner voice, quality, leadership and management [accountability]; assessment, teaching and learning, employer engagement and employability".*

The Curriculum Manager confirmed his involvement in programme decision-making when the Business provision was undergoing special measures:

> *CM-A1: "When I joined the college two years ago, I knew that the Business provision was not doing well. Most of the staff were not committed to teaching and students were getting a poor learning experience. The intervention by the senior leaders was appropriate."*

College staff as stakeholders (College A)

The need to align what is taking place in the classroom with the curriculum strategy framework was also recurrent theme. The teacher's role in the classroom or workshop, as they deliver the programme makes them key stakeholders whose views are relevant in informing programme decision-making:

> *VP-A: "The right decisions made at all levels of the college, including teacher's and course leader's views and contributions, as long as they are substantiated, are important so that there is alignment of strategy at grass root."*

The Ofsted (2015b, p.4) report corroborates this view regarding the management of the programmes:

> *"Prompt interventions have seen swift improvements in some 'problem' areas, including some outstanding advancement in teachers' professional practice and much improved outcomes for students."*

The skills and expertise of the college's teaching workforce are essential in ensuring the college programme provision meets the needs of the learners:

> *VP-A: "The need to actively manage all our programme provision; to know the quality of provision – from recruitment, learner voice, employer engagement, progression of learners and most importantly the skills of the teaching team - play a key role ensuring the courses meet learners' requirements."*

The Ofsted (2015b) report describes the strong emphasis the college places on teachers, essentially in the performance of the provision and leading to effective contribution to programme decision-making. In addition, senior leaders acknowledged the impact of good employer-employee engagement on programme decision-making:

> *P-A: "Sometimes, the reason why we don't take the right decision on programme provision and funding is because we are an employer – ultimately we want to be a good employer. Every programme decision we make will have an impact on the people we employ. The financial challenge is that most courses goes through ups and down. The reason it happens is because we are dealing with human beings. The people delivering the product are human beings; people receiving the learning are human beings."*

Employers as stakeholders (College A)

Engagement with employers

Senior leaders are increasingly turning to local and regional employers for their input when making programme decisions. The intention is to offer programmes that enhance learners' progression to relevant employment:

P-A: "If you look at the strategy we have, working with employers, co-developing programmes with them – in the best provision, employers are very much part of what we are developing now."

The Vice Principal acknowledged the potential impact of not engaging with local employers when making programme decision:

VP-A: "In this current political FE climate, you've got to think about the impact of your decisions on what employers think."

The Principal did not underestimate the role of employers as key stakeholders:

P-A: "You often find that a failing provision does not have a real employer engagement or industry focus."

The strategic plan for College A identifies the West of England LEP as a key driver in shaping their programme provision. However, the Vice Principal recognised that there is a gap between the curriculum strategic plan and what is happening at grass root level:

V-PA: "There is a strong identification of the influential role local employers' play in programme decision-making to ensure the provision fulfils learners' outcomes, meet the local job market demands as well as implement government education policies."

The Ofsted (2015b, p.6) report commented on the impact of employer engagement in determining the quality of the programme offer:

"Most apprentices complete their programmes, developing valuable commercial skills, and the large majority do so by the planned end date. Employers are rightly appreciative of apprentices' contribution to their businesses."

The Ofsted (2015b, p.6) report documented further evidence, supporting the college engagement with employers and the impact on the performance of the programme provision:

"Training sessions run by both employers and the college have contributed to the improvement of apprentices' success in hospitality."

However, the Principal and Vice Principal acknowledged that not all employers are willing to support the college by taking on students on work placement:

P-A: "There's a small handful of well-established businesses in the community who are reluctant to take on our learners. During our Chamber of Commerce meeting, when I approach them, they often complain how difficult it is to recruit young workers with the right interpersonal skills, but they are not willing to put their money where their mouth is, i.e. take a chance on these learners. It's almost as if college students are not good enough for them."

From the SAR-2014/15, it was evident that the college actively engage with employers when making strategic decisions about its programme provision:

> *"There is outstanding engagement of employers and other stakeholders in the development of a new vision and strategy… excellent partnership working with the LEP and others to ensure the college is appropriately positioned to support a wide range of economic and community initiatives."*

The outcome of such active engagement is summarised in the SAR-2014/15:

> *"The College programme is highly responsive to local and regional economic and employment needs and is well aligned to LEP priorities…Apprenticeship provision is increasing to respond to employer demand [thus] LEP priorities are being responded to."*

Consequently, the impact of active engagement with the LEP on programme decision-making enables "*students to train to work in sectors work where there are good opportunities to become economically independent."*

4.2.4. Theme 3: The role of senior leaders and managers (College A)

The college leaders acknowledged that the experience and skills of leadership and management are crucial in shaping organisational strategies and implementing college priorities. Therefore, programme decision-making becomes more effective. Three examples referred to include the ability of the senior leaders: first, to identify factors that contribute to provision strategy and planning; second, to evaluate how the programme provision is designed regarding key stakeholders and third, to understand how programme planning processes work.

Strategic leadership (College A)

The sub-theme strategic leadership is inextricably linked to the sub-theme of 'the role of strategic planning' and was described in Theme 1 where much of the evidence for strategic leadership has been cited. Based on the role remits of the respondents in College A, there was acknowledgement of a growing pressure to develop strategic programme provision planning that would adapt to an increasingly turbulent educational environment with dwindling financial resources. There was a view that strategic programme decision-making was increasingly needed to underpin the college performance and sustainability. As the Principal stated, the strategic plan must align with what the government will pay for. The funding and financial aspects of strategic leadership were stated as the first hurdle to overcome when making programme decision:

> *P-A: "…often the provision that performs the worse is often the most poorly performing from a financial perspective. If you look at any college that is getting an Ofsted rating of inadequate, most will also have a poor financial performance rating."*

The Ofsted (2015b, p.3) report recognised the role of senior leaders and managers in addressing poor programme performance leading to informed programme decision-making through quality improvement:

"College leaders and managers are committed to change the pace and the impact of improvement by improving the skills of teaching staff, access to more timely and accurate management information and the ability of managers to interpret and use the data to develop and implement effective plans for improvement."

Accountability (College A)

The leaders remarked that accountability permeates across all levels in the organisational structure. Having undertaken several organisational restructures, the Principal acknowledged the importance of an accountability framework within the organisational structure:

P-A: "In the best organisation, accountability flows throughout the organisation - people at all levels will have accountability for the provision within a programme. You need to be clear that accountability flows throughout the organisation upwards and downwards.

Accountability for learners' performance is one of the central roles of leaders and managers (see Appendix D). As the Principal stated, the reason why he expects accountability to spread across the whole organisation is because:

P-A: "…we need to think about what it is we are doing in terms of transforming peoples' lives to get them on their way."

The adverse impact of accountability was emphasised:

P-A: "Even in this organisation, if you can't pinpoint who do you go to for this… and no one is holding on to this, things will fall apart. It's about ownership of an issue. We must not fear that accountability means people lose their jobs."

The fallout of lack of accountability was accentuated by the Vice Principal:

VP-A: "Sometimes poorly performing courses can persist because accountability has not been identified/ highlighted."

There was strong belief that teaching staff are accountable for learners' outcomes and consequently the performance of a programme:

VP-A: "Poorly performing courses sometimes, depending on their circumstances, continue to underperform because of lack of accountability. Take Business for example, we needed a catalyst, or a watershed moment to change that. The moment was provided by poor success rates and that led to the review."

The positive effect of accountability was highlighted:

VP-A: "With a well performing course, the accountability is inherent; it's integral because somebody is accountable and allows that

course to continue; a course does not perform well by itself, it's about what is happening in the classroom and beyond that."

There is a sense of moral obligation associated with accountability:

P-A: "I do not think that public money should be spent to prop up poorly performing programmes."

Quality improvement capability (College A)

The emphasis on quality improvement was a recurring sub-theme and this was closely linked with accountability. Senior leaders identified the importance of quality assurance for effective provision management which in turn feeds into effective programme decision-making:

P-A: "The most important thing is quality. We live and die by the quality of what we do. Most of the problems we encounter are largely driven by issues of failure of quality."

The Principal acknowledged the role of senior leaders when a programme fails to deliver on quality improvement:

P-A: "The multiplicity of things we deal with at senior leadership level, means it is quite easy to drop the ball sometimes. Really, we should spot these problems before they arise but sometimes that is not possible. The key thing is to make sure they don't happen again."

Senior leaders signalled a strong correlation between accountability and the quality of teaching and learning that takes place in the classroom or workshop. Ultimately, this impacts on the success or failure of a programme leading to a decision being taken when reviewing and planning:

P-A: "It is important that senior leaders are aware of what goes on in the classroom, the quality of teaching and learning that's taking place, as well as the quality of leadership and management of that particular course. And that's people from all levels of the organisation."

One of the consequences of poor quality provision resulted in a group of students being refunded their course fees because the course failed the examination board quality checks. Consequently, senior leaders used this rationale to protect the reputation of College A and decided not to offer the course:

VP-A: The Senior Leadership Group (SLG) took the decision to drop the HNC Public Services because the rigour for quality assurance was non-existent and to continue with it would have damaged our reputation and not done anything for the students following it."

4.2.5. Further education College A: Summary of findings

Theme 1. The strategic framework used at College A underpins programme decision-making. Consisting of a set of strategic plans, the leaders use the opportunities presented by this framework to focus on employer engagement, course viability and improving the quality and performance of its programme provision. The plans set the tone for the direction of College A, for example, the strategic decision to stop offering the 'A' level provision and increase focus on the vocational programme provision.

Government funding policies and financial viability of the programme provision present constraints that impact on the context of College A. There was a distinct sense that leaders and managers felt they have little choice between agreeing or disagreeing with current government policy but to work around the challenges posed by government demands. Unsurprisingly, these decision-makers demonstrate understanding of programme performance management and funding policies which contributes to College A being in a strong financial position. This position is strengthened by a knowledgeable Board of Governors, who scrutinise the financial performance of the college, hold senior managers accountable and endorse the strategic plan. Such focus ensures that the programme provision meets the needs of local economies and communities.

Theme 2 explored the impact of stakeholders on programme decision-making. The findings indicate that learners' views, teachers' expertise and employers' engagement guide senior leaders and managers on programme decision-making. As a key stakeholder, learners play a significant role in informing leaders and managers of their study experience at the college and ultimately contribute to programme decision-making. The skills and expertise of the teaching workforce which can be viewed as opportunity or constraint, are often considered when programme decisions are made. College leaders acknowledge the impact of human factors, such as good employer-employee relationship when making decisions on programme provision. They use the opportunity presented by its strong employer engagement to improve vocational teaching and learning which further informs the strategic framework.

Theme 3 connected strategic leadership, accountability and quality improvement to the role of senior leaders and managers. Within these findings, senior leaders and curriculum managers discussed their role as well as those of teachers. The staff's ability to fulfil their role, impacts on programme performance and ultimately the success or failure of the provision as opportunities and constraints are carefully considered by decision-makers. Senior leaders and managers referred to the practices that take place during the monitoring of programme performance and of the requirement to ensure that learners' needs are met in order for them to progress to employment, further or higher education.

4.3. Further education College B

4.3.1. Background

College B is a medium-sized FE college and key provider of education and training for the two local authority areas it serves in the south-west of England. Supporting around 5000 full and part-time students, the main campus is in a large town but there are programmes off sites which include motor vehicle and construction. The college provides a small scale vocational provision to serve local schools and maintains a strategic foothold in one of the local authority areas. The region served by the college has low unemployment but low wages for those in employment.

The college was judged 'Good' by Ofsted in 2012. Its website boasts many positive features highlighted by the inspectorate including: the college's work with local and national employers; success rates for apprentices; its strong place in the community; how well the needs and interests of the students are met through effective encouragement by teaching staff and the personal support provided by teachers to help learners progress and reach their full potential.

For ease of reading, the following abbreviations are used: P-B: Principal; VP-B: Vice Principal; CM-B1 and CM-B2 are curriculum managers for engineering and health and social care programme provisions.

4.3.2. Theme 1: Further education college context (College B)

Opportunities and constraints (College B)

Opportunities

The situation at College B presents three key opportunities. First, is the ability of the college to offer a varied programme provision encompassing 14 of the 15 subject areas, covering study programmes, apprenticeships and higher education. Students recruitment are generally strong, and courses are viable, thus establishing the college a strong foothold in the community. A second opportunity is that 16-to-18-year-olds on study programme (GCE AS, A levels and National Diplomas) make up approximately 81% of overall learner numbers. The college uses this opportunity to maximise its funding allocation for these funding categories, contributing towards its very stable financial position. The college has a good reputation, across the community and beyond, for supporting vulnerable learners. It uses this status to maximise recruitment for this category of learners which further support its financial position. The third opportunity that informs the context of the college is its strong partnership and engagement with employers at local level and through the LEPs. The college uses this opportunity to involve these employers when reviewing the skills development of programme provision to closely match the skills needs of industry so that students benefit from relevant job destination.

Constraints

The following constraints inform the context of College B. First, there is a legacy of staff culture that is not learner-focused. Accountability of programme performance is lacking in some of these areas and students are not choosing the college as

their first-choice provider. Standards of the A level provision are perceived as not driven and not set high enough. Second, although the college is financially stable, leaders acknowledge the impact of the funding policy on programme decision-making, particularly when a course is not viable and does not lead to relevant job or destination for the students.

The role of strategic planning (College B)

Strategic framework

Senior leaders approach programme decision-making by reviewing the existing provision the college offers. Following consultation with the curriculum staff on their course performance, senior leaders introduced course leadership to address low retention and achievement at course level. Such close-working relationship enables staff to develop their understanding of the funding rules. This is an example of strategic planning informed by the performance of the college programme provision:

> *P-B: "As the senior team, we looked at where the gaps were, such as at level 2. For example, we asked 'what have we got for apprenticeship?' That led us to develop a strong curriculum development programme both for FE, HE and the apprenticeship which we reviewed. We have a three-year HE and FE strategic plan."*

The strategic plan was also informed and driven by external factors, particularly the requirement to meet local employers' needs:

> *P-B: "We asked ourselves what the LEP priorities are, what does the local industry need? Over the years, we have been good at offering what we are good at as opposed to offering what is needed. For every single study programme, the curriculum manager has to justify how their programme meets local priorities because if you are running a course that is not linked with jobs, local needs and progression, then why are we doing it?"*

The interview data provided additional evidence that support the role the college context plays in programme decision-making:

> *P-B: "Last summer, I took the decision to discontinue running the performing arts and music programme. It was a difficult decision. But those sorts of programme decisions are informed/ influenced by the position of the college because if the FE Commissioner asked the corporation why you are running this sort of provision that are not bringing in any money and are under-performing, then it will be right to ask this. We had to take that sort of strategic decision and the context of the college plays a part in that*".

The Strategic Plan 2014-17 describes the strategies the college will implement to inform their programme provision. Mindful of the impact on the student markets, the plan states that:

> "*There is the possibility* [and political will*] of one of the local schools creating a new sixth form which will make the choice at 16*

even greater. The college will need to ensure its programme offer is attractive to this age group, and the opportunity to develop new innovative partnerships with schools, particularly through 14-16 programmes should lead to more students deciding that the right choice at 16 is at the college."

The college also acknowledges that the changing demographic will result in fewer 16-to-18-year-olds over the 2014-17 strategic plan period, resulting in funding and financial implications. To address this, plans are in place to work with employers to grow the apprenticeship numbers.

Financial status (College B)

Senior leaders recognise that different funding rules in operation must be maximised to maintain the financial health of the college. Therefore, a deep understanding of how the funding methodology works was flagged as crucial to maximise the income for the college. The Principal explained that to meet the funding demands:

P-B: "…everyone [at different levels in the college organisation] *must understand: how to win the FE game, how they are being measured, the rules and what they need to do in different environments."*

The Principal was referring to the different funding stream for 16-to-18-year-olds, 19+ adult education and apprenticeships. The Vice Principal disagreed with the government funding policy and indicated that FE colleges are being paid too little for some specialist apprenticeship programme:

VP-B: "Although we have a strong engineering provision, like many colleges, we cannot afford to pay these specialist staff a decent salary that is comparable with the market rate. Good engineering staff is hard to keep. The funding rules do not fully consider the significant costs of setting up and maintaining a decent engineering workshop which is what employers want to see."

One of the curriculum managers summed up the challenges of understanding different government funding rules:

CM-B2: "As a curriculum manager, part of my job is to focus on promoting good quality teaching and learning to increase our chances of recruiting and retaining students so that they achieve their qualification. Now I have to get my head around different funding rules so that I can meet my department target of funding. This can be hard and stressful when a course does not recruit the right number of students."

There was widespread acknowledgement by leaders and managers of the growing pressures to adapt to an increasingly turbulent FE environment with dwindling financial resources. There was a view that strategic programme decision-making was increasingly needed to underpin the FE college performance and sustainability. The financial challenges which formulate the context of the college are succinctly captured in the Strategic Plan 2014-17:

> *"The plan requires the college to exploit new business development opportunities, seek new partnerships where beneficial and become more commercially orientated to grow its income and increase student number. This need is reinforced further by reductions in Government funding and little sign of any significant capital grant."*

The Ofsted (2015b) Report confirms the college's long-standing efforts to managing its financial health and articulates that:

> *"The college uses its available resources well to secure value for money. Managers have taken a firm strategic decision to maximise the use of income to maintain services to learners and support the development of resources. The college has been able to increase its presence in the region with the development of centres in Town* [X] *and Town* [Y]*".*

(Towns X and Y have been used to protect the anonymity of College B)

Programme performance (College B)

Senior leaders stated that the 'AS level' provision has not been performing well for many years due to low retention of learners compared to the number started, low achievement of learners retained on programme and historical poor staff culture. Despite the under-performance for its 'A' levels, senior leaders took a strategic decision to continue delivering this provision:

> *P-B: "We are a tertiary college and in terms of 'A levels, we have an obligation to run the provision because there aren't any sixth form in the area. As it is a fair amount of provision in the area, if we were to let go we'll never get these back. That would then put other schools to produce 6th Form."*

Outcomes for learners

The SAR states that leading up to academic year 2014-15, an increasing proportion of learners successfully completed their qualifications due to manager's focus on improving the quality and range offer of the provision. 86% of 16-18-year-olds on vocational study programmes achieved their qualifications compared to those (57%) on AS and A-level curriculum. The proportion of apprentices (75%) and adults (85%) who successfully completed their qualification has also risen compared to previous year and is now high. A high proportion of learners pass their GCSE English and mathematics at grade C or above than in the previous year and this compares favourably to the success of learners in similar providers. Progression data on learners' destination reveals a high proportion progress to employment.

4.3.3. Theme 2: The stakeholders (College B)

Leaders and managers reported that the College was 'losing' students to other neighbouring colleges judged 'outstanding' by Ofsted and offering programme provision of better quality. This observation offers supporting evidence that learners as stakeholders underpin the programme decision-making process.

Learners as stakeholders (College B)

There was acknowledgement that local learners are willing to travel for over half an hour to attend other colleges because the programme offer at college B was perceived as not 'good enough':

> *P-B: "I inherited a college where too many local people get on a bus, some just outside the college, to travel to another college to study. You have to think about why? What is underpinning that? And that was the whole beginning of my curriculum strategic direction for the college."*

The importance of learner's views as a factor influencing programme decision-making was strongly identified by senior leaders, who sought to capture the perspective of this group of stakeholders, vis-a-vis the performance of programme provision:

> *P-B:"…during lesson observation, we ask students 'how does this lesson meet your needs throughout the year?' We want to know that there is consistency in the way lessons are delivered. We ask them to grade on a scale of 0 to 10. 0 is not at all; 10 is perfect. We use the average/mean of 8 to 9. If below 5 then it triggers the manager to go in and see what is happening."*

College staff as stakeholders (College B)

Given the context of the college, senior leaders acknowledged the key role college staff plays as a major stakeholder group which inform the programme decision-making process. Equally, there was strong recognition that staff, from both teaching and service departments, must recognise that learners are fundamental to the success of the college:

> *P-B: "Two years ago there was no performance management, now this is key. We strongly performance manage. If you see an inadequate lesson, how long would you give them until you do something?"*

The curriculum managers and the Vice Principal support this view:

> *VP-B: "People management is key to ensure that you have the right staff. Get the right staff, and then everything else falls into shape."*

As part of managing staff performance, the Principal identified staff who were willing to be supported to improve the learning experience for students:

> *P-B: "Many staff left quickly in the first twelve months when I joined the college. Many staff also stayed but improved their teaching and learning. Some staff were willing to be helped and supported and they improved. It was all about improving the learners' experience. What I and the curriculum managers did with staff was focus on improving learners' experience."*

Employers as stakeholders (College B)

Engagement with employers

Senior leaders and managers reported that local and regional employers' input are critical in driving innovations and ultimately programme decision-making. There was a sense that given the context of the college, engagement with local employers is progressing well to ensure the programme provision meets the job market demands as well as implement government educational policies.

Employers' engagement with the quality and content of the programme provision was noted:

> *P-B: "When we observe lessons, we also get employers to comment on the lesson, not to give it a grade but to see if what we are teaching e.g. the units align to what jobs are out there. How does the skills development meet the needs of what is out there? So I have a file now that outlines how we have changed the courses in order to meet some of the skills out there."*

The senior leaders are cognisant that strategic provision planning which involves employers at programme level has created tension because some staff fail to recognise and value the impact on learners' vocational skills development:

> *VP-B: "What is important is that the skills element is being developed to match and align to what the industry wants and needs."*

Specific examples of active engagement with local employers were identified, re-enforcing the key role local employers as stakeholders play in shaping the programme provision of College B:

> *P-B: "We are working with the local hospital to deliver a programme that would see our students' progress to working in the hospital as nurses. This came about as the hospital recruit nurses from a European country because they could not recruit locally, let alone nationally. We have put together a project where we will build a 14-19 school under the Careers College on the hospital site, so that they would be supported by doctors and nurses and have mock theatres. It is about listening to local needs."*

The curriculum manager added that:

> *CM-B1: "Our health care students benefit from being taught by professionals from different areas within the hospital because of the strong partnership that we have."*

The Principal acknowledged that sometimes one must accept that not all businesses want to engage with and work with the college. In some cases, these businesses have their own independent training providers. The Vice Principal has a different view:

VP-B: "It will not surprise me if the previous poor college reputation in delivering quality training has anything to do with them not engaging with us. These employers are too professional to say this outright."

Another example was offered to emphasise the role of local employers and the impact on planning the programme provision, development, implementation and management:

P-B: "In engineering, you will see hundreds of our students wearing a local engineering company's Personal Protective Equipment kit with their logo. These students are being taught the engineering skills required by the company – the assessments that they are doing are for helicopter fuselages specific for the company. This is a great example of developing the skills set of our students to meet local needs. This also links with HE as part of the progression route."

The curriculum manager for the engineering provision added:

CM-B2: "…the college is also upskilling its teaching workforce by having specialist engineers delivering some areas of the programme alongside the college lecturers."

The Strategic Plan 2014-17 for College B provides further evidence of the continued strong partnership with employers. The document states that "*work with employers is strong and this has helped grow Apprenticeship numbers in the last few years*."

Although employers' views are sought, the Ofsted (2015b, p.5) report stated that:

"There is insufficient structured feedback from employers which the college recognises in its self-assessment as requires improvement."

4.3.4. Theme 3: The role of senior leaders and managers (College B)

Senior leaders' ability to understand their roles and responsibilities and create strategic plans for the college mission and vision was the key finding for Theme 3.

Strategic leadership (College B)

The interview data identified aspects of strategic leadership that are linked to the findings reported in the strategic planning of sub-theme 1. Senior leaders understand how to use the opportunities and constraints presented by the college context to make programme decisions that would secure the college's future. There was a sense of urgency to demonstrate strategic leadership, to get the strategic plan right for the learners and implement improvements quickly to future-proof the college position:

P-B: "When I joined the college, I knew I was on borrowed times to get people to come back through the door. So, improving learners'

experience became the focus of my strategic plan which I do every year."

The ability of the senior leaders to adapt their roles to the changing context of the college is reflected in the college Strategic Plan 2014-17 which outlines an ambitious strategic and operational plan to monitor, record and communicate progress on improvement. The Principal summarises:

> *P-B: "We have a different culture now. I do have to make a conscious effort to step back from the operational activities. My efforts are mostly on external development and partnership whilst driving programme quality and supporting the Vice Principal of curriculum when carrying out performance management."*

Accountability (College B)

The Ofsted (2015b, p.2) report acknowledged that:

> "*Governors have a clear view of the college, its strengths and areas for improvement. Governors are rigorous in reviewing their own activities and in ensuring the accountability of senior staff".*

The Principal acknowledged that when he joined the college, there was a distinct lack of pride and ambition culture across the college. Now, senior leaders expect a culture of accountability across all levels of organisational structure:

> *VP-B: "With regards to students' achievement, staff culture plays a key role. I think, probably that lack of ownership; lack of accountability, had applied across the whole college but certainly very prevalent in Engineering and Construction. That has contributed to the underperformance for these programme areas which had success rates under 50%."*

The curriculum manager recognised that:

> *CM-B2: "the although the college has made considerable progress in improving the success rate for engineering apprenticeship provision, more work is needed for the 16-to-18-year-olds engineering study programme."*

Quality improvement capability (College B)

The focus on managing the quality of the programme provision was recognised. The accountability of middle managers' ability to manage the quality of teaching and learning was noted:

> *CM-B1: "Us,* [curriculum] *managers are focused on programme management and quality assurance. We work with the senior quality manager who looks after the quality aspects of teaching and learning.* [Collectively] *we are responsible to oversee the quality of the programme provision."*

4.3.5. Further education College B – Summary of findings

Theme 1. The context of FE College B indicates that its curriculum strategy is focused on internal growth. The college seizes on the opportunities presented by its context to increase recruitment of learners across the wide range of subjects its programme provision offers. In recognising the constraints, senior leaders acknowledge that the college must address the performance of its existing programme provision and improve the quality of teaching and learning for its learners. Accordingly, improvements in learner experience and satisfaction have the potential to improve the college reputation resulting in increased recruitment of learners. Furthermore, in recognising the wider financial constraint presented by central government, senior leaders work closely with the curriculum staff to develop a good understanding of the funding rules. Consequently, the college strategy is focused on improving the programme provision it offers local learners in a bid to reduce their attraction to other colleges, increases recruitment and maximise the college income.

Theme 2. The findings demonstrate the key role learner views play in driving the planning, development and implementation of the programme provision. There is a very strong focus on improving the quality of the learning experience for students. Correspondingly, the college SAR captures such focus as it aims "…*to be recognised as the provider of choice by delivering a high quality, dynamic, relevant and responsive programme provision for young people, adults and employers."*

Employees at College B appear to be heavily performance managed to develop a high standard of teaching. When interviewed, senior leaders acknowledged that while some staff left the organisation, many are willing to be supported to improve the learning experience for student.

As a significant group of stakeholders, employers' input in supporting the college aligns its programme provision with the LEP priorities, is identified as an important strategic aim. Such employer engagement contributes to improving the career choices for local learners and maximising growth opportunities for the college. The College's strategic plan summarises the pivotal role of the LEP in the strategic planning of the programme provision: "*the LEP will become the conduit for all capital funding…and this therefore places them at the centre of our strategic planning."*

Theme 3. The findings reveal that strategic leadership links the three themes. Senior leaders and managers carefully consider the opportunities and constraints presented by changes in the funding policy. The strategic priorities place the learners and links with the local community at the centre of college's core business. By focusing on improving its students' experience and exploiting new business development opportunities with external stakeholders, leaders identify effective ways to reach strategic programme decision-making.

4.4. Further education College C

4.4.1. Background

College C is a small-to-medium FE college based in the centre of rural county in the south-west. The main college site is located in a small town which has a long history as a coalfield mining town until its closure in the early 70s. Serving 1,000 full time students and 5,000 part-time students, College C provides vocational programmes across several small community venues. The area it serves is largely rural and has indices of high deprivation. Most students are transported into the college for morning start and afternoon pick-up, from a wider area on free bus services provided by the college. The occupational profile of adults in the town is predominantly in skilled trades, professional, caring administration, technical sales and customer services.

According to its website, the college prides itself as community-based and has expanded its range of vocational programmes. Correspondingly, its website documents the teaching and training provision for learners and local employers through skills workshops in engineering, motor vehicle, construction, animal care and land-based provisions. The college works with local schools and training providers to broaden vocational opportunities for learners aged 14-to-16 and offers foundation degree in computing and business.

For ease of reading, the abbreviations used are: P-C: Principal; VP-C: Vice Principal; CM-C1 and CM-C2 are curriculum managers for land-based and engineering and construction provisions.

4.4.2. Theme 1: The further education college context (College C)

Opportunities and constraints (College C)

Opportunities

At College C, 16-to-18-year-olds on study programme make up approximately 83% of the college learner numbers, presenting the college with the opportunity to draw most of its funding from central government. About a third of students come to the college with low prior attainment. Consequently, most learners are studying on low level foundation and intermediate programmes, an opportunity which the college seizes on, to offer a broad programme provision that meets the needs of the community.

At the time the study took place, there was an interim senior management team in place to oversee the impending merger with another college. Leaders and managers of College C used this opportunity to start addressing some of the numerous issues the college was facing. The previous Principal who had been in post for 16 years had recently retired in November 2014. The Vice Principal for Curriculum and Quality who was appointed in autumn 2012 became Principal in December 2014 but left college employment in February 2015. The interim Principal was interviewed for this study in March 2015.

Constraints

The findings indicate that the context of College C ascended from three critical constraints: poor quality of teaching and learning; poor leadership and management and poor financial management.

The evidence from the findings suggests that the poor quality of teaching and learning for the majority of the programme offered at College C was a significant constraint. According to the college's SAR 2013-14, SAR 2014-15 and Ofsted reports (2015b), the broad programme provision required improvement. Ofsted (2015b) graded most of the subject areas College C offers. Animal care, Equine studies and ICT were graded 'Good'; Health and social care and Engineering were both graded 'Requiring Improvement' and Motor vehicle studies was 'Inadequate'.

The Ofsted (2015b) report stated that college staff and governors have lost confidence in the executive and senior management team, which is seen to lack dynamism, focus and pace. The two curriculum managers interviewed also confirmed this observation. The constraint presented by the judgement of inadequate for leadership and management, put the leaders under significant pressure from Ofsted and the DfE to identify a suitable range of strategies to promote improvement across the programme provision. Conversely, this presented an opportunity for the leaders to identify key improvement strategies.

In November 2014, a second re-inspection visit took place to explore the progress that managers, governors and staff have made in raising the quality of the programme provision at College C. The second re-inspection focused on five areas which contributed to the constraints and in some instances opportunities for the college: inadequate leadership and management including inadequate financial position; the slow rate of improvement since the previous inspection; teaching, learning and assessment that required improvement; poor progress and progression of students; and the poor development of students' competence in English and mathematics. These areas hold key implications in the performance of the provision and therefore are significant factors in programme decision-making for College C.

The serious financial difficulties College C was facing presented a major constraint. Evidence from the findings indicate that lack of financial expertise at senior leadership level and low recruitment of students were contributory factors.

The role of strategic planning (College C)

Strategic framework

At College C, evidence of the lack of strategic planning that impacted on programme decision-making was documented in the FE Commissioner's Assessment Summary:

> *"The college lacks clear strategic direction and is described as 'drifting'…the college lacks ambition, drive, urgency and pace"* (FE/CAS, 2014, p.2).

The Ofsted (2015b, p.3) report also identified failings in the strategic planning that adversely impacted on the progress of the college:

> *"Managers have not effectively translated the overarching priorities into meaningful, challenging and attainable targets at course* [programme] *or curriculum area level."*

A senior leader observed that there was little rationalisation of the programme provision including under-developed provision planning:

> *VP-C: "The college ran an equine programme.* [which provides learners with the opportunity to care for horses by working in riding schools or using harnessed horses, in addition to experiencing work in a range of locations including: livery, racing and training yards]. *This provision had no industry standards. Students were not being trained to carry out industry standard activities. It transpired that the course was created to suit a personal interest rather than employer led. The context of equine and that of the industry were not considered."*

Senior leaders acknowledged that even though the programme provision was broad and diverse, the number of students enrolled at the college was too low to meet the running costs of the college. The under-developed strategic plan resulted in too many courses offered with small numbers of student. For example, there were only five students enrolled on the hairdressing programme in academic year 2014-15:

> *P-C: "There was a weak strategic approach to programme provision planning. The focus on running courses was about money - getting students in and running as many courses as possible with very little attention to viable class size."*

Financial status (College C)

The college was facing financial difficulties. Student numbers were too few to draw the funding required to keep the college financially stable. The Principal attributed this situation partly to the lack of strategic plan:

> *P-C: "The absence of a financial expert at senior leadership level to guide us on the complex financial quagmire of educational funding is our Achilles Heel."*

At curriculum management level, the decline in student numbers was recognised as the key contributor to the financial situation:

> *CM-C1: "We are attracting too few learners on our courses. The class sizes are too small and, in many classes, there are less than eight learners in the group. On top of that, many of these learners have behaviour problems and we rarely get the support from parents or from senior management."*

Further evidence of the small class sizes was given.

> *CM-C2:* "*Students travel from out of county to attend some of our programmes because these are not offered in their locality. This*

> *means that some of our programmes are run on a small number of student enrolments. Of course, this impact on the funding but there are also wider implications for teaching and learning and staff morale"*

The FE Commissioner's report (FE/CAS, 2014, p.3) attributed the weak financial status to excessive staff costs:

> *"The college has posted a deficit in each of the last three years and in each year, there was an adverse variance against both the original and adjusted budgets. Major contributions to this overall poor financial position are small class sizes and high staffing costs which represents over 70% of turnover*".

The FE Commissioner's report (p.4) further assessed that "…*the Board of Governors has been slow to respond to emerging issues and lacks expertise in financial matters"*.

Programme performance (College C)

The FE Commissioner's and the Ofsted's (2015b) reports documented unacceptable levels of programme performance. The interim Principal and Vice Principal both commented that poor staff performance in teaching, learning and assessment was not properly managed. One of the curriculum managers commented that "*when the interim senior leaders joined us, three lecturers were performance managed out of the college within a month, two in computing and one in engineering."*

The Ofsted Monitoring Visit report (2015b, p.4) assessed that:

> *"Few governors have created opportunities to familiarise themselves with more [*programme] *areas in the college, to meet with students and staff and to acquaint themselves more with day-to-day classroom-based activities."*

The Ofsted (2015b, p.3) report identified lack of accountability leading to insufficient improvement to address the poor programme performance at the college:

> *"The Principal and a minority of key curriculum managers have demonstrated insufficient insight and ownership of the* [programme provision*] quality improvement plan. Managers have not yet made progress on all the actions identified in their action plan."*

The leaders and manager who were responsible to improve the performance of the provision through quality monitoring and sound programme decision-making had not themselves been subject to rigorous annual appraisal (FE/CAS, 2014), a point also emphasised by the Ofsted Monitoring Visit report (2015b, p.2):

> *"The Principal has failed to ensure that managers have completed the performance review and target-setting process with all members of their team. The Principal has not completed her own formal review of performance or agreed performance targets with the*

Chairman of the corporation. Governors therefore have no targets against which they can objectively evaluate the performance of the Principal."

Outcomes for learners

The college self-assessment report (SAR-2014/15c) lists overall success rates of: 80% for its 16-18-year-old learners on study programmes, 55% for apprenticeship and 89% for the adult provision. 66% of learners pass their GCSE English and 78% for mathematics. Except for the outcomes for adult provision, the remainder outcomes for learners did not compare favourably to the success of learners in similar providers and were judged as 'Requires Improvement' by Ofsted (2015b). Progression data on learners' destination were not available.

4.4.3. Theme 2: The stakeholders (College C)

College C has established partnerships with schools and training providers to offer opportunities for 14-to-16-year-olds. Good links existed with the LEPs and an Employer Forum has representatives from local employers in construction, engineering, child care, animal care, horticulture and health and social care. The local council is also represented on the Employer Forum which facilitates work experience opportunities for learners and supports the development of employability skills.

Learners as stakeholders (College C)

The leaders and managers interviewed for this study believed that College C prides itself in being a highly inclusive college. Approximately one third of the students start the college with low prior GCSE attainment (GCSE results that are below C grades). They believe that the programme provision is designed to provide its learners with high-levels pastoral support:

P-C: "We have a lot of students with low GCSE grades, learning difficulties and disabilities. We face huge challenges when it comes to supporting these learners. But overall they receive good pastoral and academic support to help them progress."

Further supporting evidence was offered:

VP-C: "Students in engineering, construction and computing, speak highly of their teachers. They really feel well supported. For example, this support has contributed to our level 1 carpentry provision achieving the highest success rates across the college construction provision."

A curriculum manager summarised the challenges faced by staff when supporting learners:

CM-C2: "Too many students display poor conduct, especially during maths and English lessons. Staff really struggle to promote high standards. Many teachers do not have the confidence to address poor learner behaviour, not just in the classroom, but also around the college."

Another curriculum manager acknowledged that the programme provision facilitates the development of wider skills for some students:

> *CM-C1: "Many students go on work placement. The programme provision across the college is good at that, especially in animal care, horticulture, media and make up and health and social care."*

The interim leaders believed that learners' views demonstrated that the programme provision was the right fit for the College. Considering learners' low prior attainment, the leaders recognised that programme decisions made by the previous senior leadership team broadly reflected the needs of its learners but acknowledged that not enough students are recruited.

College staff as stakeholders (College C)

Whilst it was clear that most learners are supported well, senior leaders and managers acknowledged that a significant majority of college staff felt unsupported. Staff turnover was high and many leave college employments because working conditions were, in general, poor. A curriculum manager explained:

> *CM-C2: "It appears that the college does not value staff. Most staff are not happy with the way the College is going. They feel unsupported when it comes to disciplining and reprimanded students for poor behaviour."*

Another curriculum manager described the college as a caring institution for learners, but she believed there is fundamental failure to address poor behaviour from a small number of students:

> *CM-C1:* "*We are predominantly a caring institution. Everyone knows that. We strongly support learners who are not able to travel out of the county. When students need firm discipline, there is a perceived lack of support from senior leaders, for teaching staff and curriculum managers. Disciplinary procedures are not followed up and I feel that senior managers are scared to lose students. So poor behaviour continues, and this affects the learning for others."*

The Principal recognised that a large majority of staff are enthusiastic and motivated. They have a good rapport with students. However, she remarked that too many staff do not have the skills and experience to address poor classroom behaviour:

> *P-C: "We serve a largely rural area which has indices of high deprivation. We have a significant number of disengaged learner. To support these learners, we need staff who are not only well qualified but also committed to good teaching and learning. Sadly, too many of our staff are not. We are doing our best to support them through coaching and mentoring."*

The leaders and managers recognise the importance of staff possessing the right skills and expertise to offer an effective provision, confirming the link between what

takes place in the classrooms and workshops and the performance of the programme.

Employers as stakeholders (College C)

Engagement with employers

The leaders and managers described with enthusiasm how the learning programmes meet the needs and interests of employers and the local community:

> *CM-C2: "Our programme provision for young people includes courses not offered elsewhere in the local area, e.g. courses in land-based, veterinary nursing and motor vehicle. Students find jobs locally. We are aware that we don't recruit enough students, though."*

The college delivers flexible programme provision for adults returning to education and employment.

> *VP-C: "We deliver a number of short courses, for example, Introduction to Health and Social Care, CSCS Card to enable people to work on building site and Business Administration. All these courses enable local people to obtain employment."*

The diverse programme provision offers a range of courses:

> *VP-C: "We have a good range of distance learning courses that support local employers, particularly in the care sector. Employer forums provide an effective conduit for information about the college's curriculum* [programme provision] *and for the needs of employers."*

The Principal gave four examples of how the college contributes to local community developments: through the councils' Learning Partnership; 14-to-19 Strategy Board; Children Trust Board and Lifelong Learning and Skills Partnership. However, programme decision-making has not been as effective. Implementation of guidance from employers was under-developed at classroom/workshop and management levels.

4.4.4. Theme 3: The role of senior leaders and managers (College C)

Making allowances for the context of College C, specifically the recent changes in senior leadership, the study found deficiencies in the effectiveness of the previous senior management team. The strategic plan was unclear, and the scope of the programme provision drew insufficient learner funds. Weaknesses in the strategic leadership, including lack of accountability and focus on the quality improvement capability meant that curriculum management was poor, impacting on programme decision-making.

Strategic leadership (College C)

The senior management team had an unclear focus on the direction of the college:

> *P-C: "The lack of strategic direction meant the college was drifting. There was a distinct lack of ambition and drive to improve the curriculum* [programme provision]*, particular the quality of teaching and learning."*

The lack of focus and pace on improving the quality of teaching and learning resulted in the college making insufficient progress in raising standards for learners:

> *P-C: "Previous managers did not make effective use of performance management to improve teaching. The impact is that teaching, and learning continued to be poor."*

The Ofsted (2015b, p.6) report criticised senior managers for lack of rigorous monitoring of teaching and learning:

> *"Performance management procedures are inadequate. The Principal and senior leaders have not implemented rigorous measures for managing the performance of teachers. They have not properly applied plans to ensure that observation of teaching should contribute to the appraisal of teachers."*

Accountability (College C)

The views of the leaders and managers were that individuals were not always clear of what it was they were accountable for and this impacted negatively on improving the quality of the programme provision:

> *P-C: "If you look at last year's [2013-14] self-assessment report, the college target for most of the actions was 85% compliance. What this tells us is that the expectations for the achievement of targets were set at too low a standard. There were not enough checks on progress and targets of previously agreed milestones. Overall, accountabilities across the college for individual actions are not clear.*

Performance management throughout the college was not satisfactory:

> *P-C: "When I took over, a number of programmes were performing below national average. No performance reviews or target setting was available that would have indicated who is responsible for what to improve the performance of the programme."*

The interim Principal added:

> *P-C: "Poor accountability across the organisation appeared to be the norm. When you speak to managers or teachers, very few understand their role and contribution to improving the course,*

which is the bread and butter of the college – the future of the college. This frustrates me."

A curriculum manager voiced similar frustrations about the lack of accountability across the college:

CM-C1: "In the first two months or so when I joined the college, I have been trying to get my head around my curriculum area which is Construction and Engineering. The lack of direction from [previous] senior leaders in terms of where we're going with construction and engineering has been frustrating."

The lack of accountability across the college was further emphasised by the interim Principal. She referred to the FE Commissioner's report which stated the urgent need to "*create a whole staff ownership"* (FE/CAS, 2014, p.4) for monitoring and reviewing the performance of the programmes encompassing teaching and learning at all levels to inform programme decision-making.

Quality improvement capability (College C)

Senior leaders of College C had not been successful in implementing improvements in the quality of the programme provision:

P-C: "Last year, although the college was found to be inadequate in overall effectiveness by Ofsted, teaching and learning was slowly improving, which was down to the hard work of the teachers. The main criticism was aimed at the then Principal and senior leaders and managers for not carrying out improvements in the quality of the provision for students especially on study programmes."

Further evidence points to the previous senior leaders' weaknesses:

VP-C: "Given the serious predicaments the college found itself in, the actions in the college self-assessment report last year were very weak - reformatting the scheme of work was considered a good outcome."

Under-developed progress monitoring has limited the college's capacity to improve (Ofsted, 2015b, p.10):

"The Principal, senior leaders and managers have not carried out improvements and recommendations with sufficient urgency and effectiveness. They have not acted with sufficient determination to ensure that targets, actions and sharing of best practice have secured consistent improvement across the college."

FE Commissioner found that:

"The capacity and capability of the senior team requires urgent attention. The roles of management and governance are

blurred and overlapping...governance is weak with only a limited challenge of the executive" (FE/CAS, 2014, p.5).

4.4.5. Further education College C: Summary of findings

Theme 1. College C serves an area that has indices of high deprivation. However, the findings reveal significant weaknesses in the leadership and management of the programme provision resulting in major constraints. Limited strategic understanding by senior leaders led to wider consequences on the performance of the programme provision from management to classroom levels. The interim leaders acknowledged that class sizes were small due to low recruitment of learners. Leadership for learning was not fully developed and the lack of curriculum expertise led to poor strategic planning of the programme provision. Although contentious with regards to the unjust and unfair inspection framework, the intervention by the FE Commissioner indicated the extent and seriousness of the college mismanagement of the performance of the programme provision. The financial difficulties the college was experiencing meant that decisions on what courses to offer were based on short-term solutions to address the financial shortfall.

Theme 2. In relation to the impact of stakeholders on programme decision-making, the findings found some evidence that learners were adequately supported. In some subject areas such as engineering and computing, staff use their expertise to support learners achieve their qualifications. The curriculum managers reported that poor behaviour of some learners was not appropriately challenged, and this disrupted the learning experience for others. Some staff did not have the expertise to manage classroom or workshop conduct. Employer Forums provided opportunities to engage with local businesses and their input was sought when deciding on provision offer. However, poor approaches to the management of teaching and learning, contributed to College C struggling to implement the guidance from local businesses.

Theme 3. As mentioned in Theme 1, College C was experiencing considerable difficulties in the effectiveness of its leadership and management. The interim leaders reported that previous senior leaders were unclear about their roles, including leadership for learning. There was a breakdown in accountability resulting in the lack of responsibility for quality improvement. The interim leaders and the managers who took part in the interviews were preparing for College C to merge with another college. Their involvement in previous programme decision-making, which has created the context for College C, was limited as their main focus was on implementing management approaches to leading and managing the programme provision. Such approaches involved: securing quality improvements for the existing provision; increasing student numbers; establishing clear lines of staff ownership and accountability including performance management and development of staff.

4.5. Concluding summary of findings

This section provides a summary of the findings including reflection on the similarities and differences across the three colleges. Within each theme, I have also summarised the findings from the perspectives of the three different levels of management and the impact of their engagement with programme decision-making.

Theme 1. The FE college context. Sub-themes: strategic framework; programme provision; funding policies.

The context of College A indicates a strong focus on strategic planning that led to the creation of a strategic framework. The leaders' and managers' perspectives are that decisions about programme provision should be made within the strategic framework. The strategic decision to stop running the 'A' level provision was a deliberate move to position the college as a key vocational programme provider in the community. The context of College B also suggests a strong focus on strategic planning. However, leaders and managers predominantly use the plan to focus on improving the quality of the programme provision. The leaders are cognisant of the college's poor reputation which led to a considerable number of students travelling to other colleges to study. Consequently, the strategic plan reflects the context of the college; identifies quality improvement plans for teaching and learning and informs programme decision-making. The leaders of both colleges use their strategic plan to outline ways the colleges would seek new partnership to grow the college income. The context of College C infers that leadership for learning was under-developed, encompassing limited strategic oversight as result of poor leadership and management of programme provision.

Reflecting on the constraints of the funding policies, the leaders and managers of all three colleges stressed the importance of monitoring the viability of courses to maintain financial security and compliance with funding rules. The leaders of College A emphasised that the strong financial position of the college is due to close monitoring of course viability and successful exploitation of courses for which learners pay full fees. The Principal of College B recognised that although the college's financial position was stable, there was an urgent need to increase the revenue through exploitation of new business development opportunities. The interim Principal of College C affirmed that the establishment was struggling to tackle its inadequate financial position. The senior leaders and managers recognised the impact of poor management of programme provision, encompassing a combination of low learner recruitment, disproportionate number of teacher-student ratio leading to high level of staff cost compare to the college turnover.

Across all the three colleges, the data from different levels of leadership and management indicate compliance and meeting current policy demands (almost at all cost) instead of agreement or disagreement with government funding policy. At principal and vice principal levels similar views were expressed with regards to the challenges the colleges face because of the current policy demands. Most of the senior leaders understand the funding rules and apply these appropriately to maximise funding and set strategic targets. At curriculum management level, managers acknowledged the need to understand funding rules to maximise government allocation. However, manager's focus is predominantly on operational

requirements encompassing implementing strategies for managing programme provision.

Theme 2. The stakeholders. Sub-themes: learners' experience and views; engagement with employees and employers

At Colleges A and B, leaders and managers recognise the value of learners' voice and take their opinions into account when making decisions about the programme provision. The findings reveal that learners at College C were adequately supported but there was little evidence that their views were considered or contributed to programme decision-making. Leaders and curriculum managers across all three colleges share similar views that the college reputation is affected by poor learner experience. Data evidence from the interviews suggests that managers generally agree that intervention by senior managers is appropriate when teaching is not effective.

Across all three colleges, employee engagement is a significant factor leaders and managers consider when making programme decision. As such, teachers' expertise and their role in ensuring the quality of teaching and learning is maintained are key contributing factors. In Colleges A and B, the strategic plans outline staff development action plans to improve teaching and ultimately learners' experience. In both these colleges, evidence from the findings, including outcomes for learners, indicate the impact of good teaching and learning. In College C, the legacy of poor management of teaching and learning and limited staff development opportunities contributed to low employee engagement in programme decision-making. Leaders and managers share similar views on the need to manage programme provision which includes maintaining the quality of courses to ensure learners and employers needs are met.

The findings indicate similarities in the way all the three colleges engage with employers at local and regional levels, seeking their input when making decisions about programme provision. The differences lie in the management, implementation and outcomes of engagement. In Colleges A and B, the focus on employer engagement was clearly articulated in their strategic plans and effectively managed and implemented for the benefit of the learners. Consequently, these colleges successfully deliver relevant industry-focused programme provision with curriculum managers playing a key role in its implementation, effectiveness and outcomes. The complex context of College C, meant that although employer engagement was sought at senior leadership level, this had minimum impact on programme decision-making due to reduced effectiveness of management of the college provision.

Theme 3. The roles of senior leaders and managers. Sub-themes: strategic leadership; accountability; quality improvement capability.

The findings demonstrate that sub-theme strategic leadership links with Themes 1 and 2. In Colleges A and B, there were similarities in the development and implementation of strategic leadership on activities that impacted positively on the management of programme provision. For example, senior leaders focussed on priorities, including programme decision-making, that would future-proof the sustainability of the college. In contrast, strategic leadership was under-developed in College C and as a result, the management approaches to leading and managing programme provision was not as effective as the other two colleges.

The evidence suggests similarities in the way leaders at Colleges A and B instil a culture of accountability partly through defined roles and responsibilities. Consequently, the leaders' and managers' plans were similar when monitoring activities and progress of management approaches that impact on the performance and accountability of the programme provision. The data from the findings indicate that senior leaders hold curriculum managers and teaching staff to account for learners' outcomes and programme performance. These activities significantly contribute to the effectiveness of programme decision-making. However, at College C, monitoring of these activities were less effective, particularly at senior leadership level.

Chapter Five: Discussion

5.0. Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings of the study. The first section revisits the suitability of open systems framework for analysing programme decision-making and sets the scene for the subsequent three sections which analyse programme decision-making in terms of the themes and sub-themes. Then the limitations of the research enquiry are discussed. The chapter ends with a summary of the key emergent themes relating to the research questions.

5.1. Open systems framework: suitability for analysing programme decision-making

The framework described in Chapter Three is broadly based on the principle that programme decision-making in FE colleges is shaped by their environment, inputs, processes, outputs and a network of feedbacks. As represented in Figure 1, the structure of the framework appropriately encapsulates the internal and external forces that exert influences of an economic, social and political nature on programme decision-making. These factors are the starting point in understanding the complex and under-researched topic of programme decision-making in FE colleges.

The findings suggest the FE environment provides key resources that contribute to influencing change in the programme provision that colleges offer. Amidst heightened scrutiny by the quality assurance agencies, the environment places demand of a political, social and economic nature on FE college leaders and managers. As evidenced in College C, there are harsh consequences if these demands are not clearly understood by the leaders. This sentiment echoes with Bastedo's (2004, p.2) view that:

> *"contemporary studies of accountability movements… and instructional leadership all benefit from a strong open systems approach to understanding environmental demands and the resulting adaptation in school policy and its implementation, or lack thereof."*

Indeed, there are different theories linked with open systems framework. Bastedo (2004, p.2) refers to "*many flavours of open systems theories*", including contingency, institutional and resource dependency. The complex nature of colleges means that they deal with a multiplicity of goals and tasks, work with varied groups of individuals and interact with environmental constraints (Shafritz et al, 2015). Although further exploration of leadership type and organisational theories are beyond the scope of this research, they nonetheless provide an open systems perspective of organisations' effectiveness. Furthermore, I am cognisant that my research is concerned with FE policy whilst Bastedo (2004) was referring to school policy. However, I believe his view is applicable to FE colleges. Although open systems theories come in many guises, they share the common notion that an organisation's effectiveness is dependent upon its relationship with the environment. Using the framework, the three themes from the findings are analysed using the RQs whilst addressing the aim of the research. The internal and external factors affecting the programme provision are discussed in terms of input, process, output and feedback.

5.2. The context of further education colleges

To understand the role of context in programme decision-making, it is helpful to have an overview of funding in FE (see section 2.6), which is an example of government education policies and an external factor of the FE environment (see Figure 1). Strategically and operationally, colleges identify and establish their programme provision from curriculum planning activities. Programmes and courses are internal factors that provide the inputs as identified in Figure 1. The study evidence suggests that when the programme provision is linked to funding rules, it has a critical bearing on the context of FE colleges (see Jupp, 2015).

5.2.1. Impact of funding priorities on the context of the college

FE colleges are publicly-funded educational institutions, held to account by the funding agencies and government regulators. In section 5.4.3, I discuss the wider impact of accountability. The AoC (2014) offers evidence that the government is countering the autonomy of the FE sector by active steerage through the Skills Funding Agency (SFA), Education Funding Agency (EFA) and Ofsted. Focussing on the impact of funding, this study indicates that most colleges are exploring innovative ways to improve their income, for example by delivering full cost courses. However, as seen in Chapter One, although most FE colleges offer a varied range of programmes, courses and qualifications to diverse group of learners, 16-to-18-year-olds make up the largest group (AoC, 2015). As such, colleges rely heavily on the government to fund programme provision for this group. Consequently, the funding agencies have a major influence, arguably of a political nature, on programme decision-making. The focus on leadership for learning (Jupp, 2015) means that leaders and managers prioritise activities that lead to student success to maximise funding.

Historically, colleges were funded on the number of qualifications a learner achieves. Following Wolf's (2011) recommendations, funding is drawn per learner. The reduction to the overall FE budget, described in Chapter One, along with changes to funding rules and a system in which money is withdrawn from colleges if they fail to recruit viable student numbers, have resulted in a significant reduction in adult and FE and Skills spending (AoC, 2014). Furthermore, colleges are financially penalised by a reduction in funding when a 16-to-18-year-old on a college study programme does not achieve his or her GCSE English and/or mathematics with grades C or above. Linking achievement to funding is a contentious issue which the FE sector is experiencing.

The FE environment places demand of an economic nature on colleges. As colleges face reduction of up to 17% in their Adult Skills Budget (AoC, 2014), leaders must identify other ways to generate income outside the SFA and EFA budget allocations. FE colleges need to reposition their establishment (Jupp, 2015) away from adult provision to realign and strengthen their finance. Colleges A and B seized on the opportunities presented by their context to successfully develop and teach many non-funded programmes which require the students to pay for courses at full cost. Income from non-funded programmes represented approximately 12% of the total income for College A and approximately 15% for College B. In College C, there was no evidence of non-funded programme.

It is not surprising that leaders in these colleges identify that one of the most significant concern for decision-makers is how they should manage their finances. These concerns are acknowledged by the AoC (2014) which urges FE leaders to make sound programme decisions in order to maintain sustainable financial credibility and ensure their provision meets the demands of the community they serve. Simmons (2010) is more scathing and argues that as a result of policymakers' limited direct knowledge or experience of FE, the sector is suffering the consequences from significant under-funding from central government. Furthermore, Wolf (2011) provides evidence that successive governments have created complex, expensive and inflexible regulatory funding and accountability systems which actively deter colleges from providing post-16 courses that would benefit the UK labour market.

Further evidence of the impact of funding policies is noted. The AoC (2014) confirmed that funding allocations for FE colleges between 2013-14 and 2014-15 academic year were significantly reduced due to falling student numbers and reduction in the adult skills funding. Consequently, Colleges A and B made programme decisions based on strategies which involved cost reductions, improvement in programme performance and significant income growth. Accordingly, these programme management strategies generated much-needed revenue to enhance the college financial security. In contrast, College C was unable to implement sound programme management strategies to remain financially viable. The emphasis on financial economy appears to influence programme decision-making when linked with management strategies for the organisation and management of programme provision.

The influence of funding policies on programme decision-making resonates with Powell's (2008) view, Torrance's (2007, p.292) *"high stakes accountability and financial insecurity"* and as mentioned, Wolf's (2011) assessment on the role of government funding agencies. The state is perceived as a composite institution which "*operates through an array of bureaucratic and legislative mechanisms to formulate policies that individual subordinate institutions implement*" (Powell, 2008, p.5). FE Leaders and managers have little choice but to comply with government's funding rules whilst relying on their membership association (predominantly the AoC) to act on their collective voice and lobby for change. Subsequently, the implications of funding policies on programme provision and ultimately on programme decision-making remain a constraint and a clear example of an external source of pressure that inform the context of all FE colleges.

5.2.2. The influence of programme provision on the context of the college

The study provides evidence that the context of each college is also dependent upon how leaders define the purpose of their educational establishment in their community. Driven by opportunities and constraints presented by their locality, the college strategic framework plays a key role in determining the vision and mission of their establishment. The diversity of college programme provision, often seen as strength has the potential to bring confusion about the role and purpose of FE colleges (Foster, 2005, Hodgson, 2015). This viewpoint is a paradox, as the very responsiveness of FE colleges to the different agendas set by the government (Hodgson, 2015) also creates a muddled and confused image (Green, 2013; Miller, 2015). The contradictory demands faced by FE leaders and managers when deciding on their programme provision were apparent in all three colleges. The evidence suggests that the FE environment places demand of a wider social

nature on colleges. It calls for leaders to use their leadership skills, knowledge and experience to exercise judgement about short and long-term risks, including financial security, relating to their college contexts and environments when considering the conditions for making programme decisions.

Some colleges have developed specialisms in their programme provision. For example, College A focuses on vocational programmes including creative arts, and engineering. College B, on the other hand, uses the knowledge of its context to continue offering A-level provision. College C offers opportunities for 14-to-16-year-olds and work in partnership with their schools. The leaders demonstrate the benefits of capitalising on their autonomy by being innovative when making programme decisions and being responsive to local needs. Institutional autonomy (Powell, 2008) means that FE colleges often identify a niche and develop their own competitive edge (Wolf, 2011; Hodgson, 2015) when deciding their programme provision. When analysed using the framework (Figure 1), the configuration of programmes and courses, as internal factors, is a compelling element which provides valuable input in the processing of programme decision-making.

5.2.3. Concluding comments: The context of further education college

In the current funding methodology, funding follows learners. Therefore, a growth in the number of learners recruited means more funding for the college. As leadership for learning becomes a priority, the study found that the quality of the programme offered must be compelling enough to entice learners to enrol on the college courses. Poor leadership and management of the performance of the programme provision, particularly relating to perceived low quality of teaching and learning has the potential to tarnish the reputation of the college (as seen in College B) and could lead to low student recruitment and unviable class sizes (as seen in College C).

Funding agencies will give a steer and sometimes a political steer (O'Sullivan, 2011) on provision planning and influence programme decisions, as evidenced in all three colleges. The political steer on FE college programme decision-making is a significant finding. Furthermore, the intentions to improve the English and mathematics skills for post-16 learners (Wolf, 2011) are seen as a policy and political intervention. Although well intended, this policy is having negative impact on college learner outcomes (Ofsted, 2015) and funding when the results are below national expectations. Other factors such as the performance of the programme in terms of outcomes for learners and the quality of teaching and learners' satisfaction, are also significant programme management strategies which inform the context of the college. I argue that leaders and managers could develop more appropriate perspectives and framing of the context of their educational institution, locality and environment and link these to their strategic plan. In doing so, programme decision-makers may broaden their context, use multiple perspectives and optimise their search for funding options when making programme decisions in the prevailing unstable FE environment.

5.3. Further education stakeholders

In this section, I discuss the learners, curriculum employees and employers as key stakeholders who represent inputs from the FE environment in the analysis of programme decision-making.

5.3.1. Learner experience and learner views

There is a good case for arguing that learners want to attend a college that will give them the best foundation for success. This means choosing a college that offers the best learning experience. As evidenced in the findings, leadership for learning is a key priority for the colleges and is in line with Marsh's (2013) principles of programme of study encompassing the management of learners' learning experience. Central to its core business is the college's ability to support all learners to develop relevant skills and achieve their qualifications so that they can progress on to their next step, employment or further or higher education (Chapman, 2001), hence meeting its social obligations. With varying degrees of success, all three colleges have made and taken deliberate decisions to adjust their programme design and provision to align these more closely with learners' needs. As observed in Colleges A and B, the outcomes for learners were positive and the majority were developing relevant skills for progression. In College C, if we focus on 16-18-year-olds provision, the students were adequately supported even though the overall outcomes for learners required improvement.

Learner views are sought on a range of curriculum operations (Hodgson, 2015) and contribute to management approaches to leading and managing programme provision. For example, it is common for colleges (as seen in Colleges A and B) to seek students' opinions on: the extent to which their lessons or training sessions are taught well; the progress they are making, whether they are enjoying their course, and would they recommend the college to a friend. Learners' views have a wider impact on programme decision-making. Securing affirmative learner experience confirms the positive things the college is doing, enhances its reputation to attract more learners and consequently increases the number of learners recruited. I have discussed earlier how an increase in the number of learners enrolled means the college draws more funding for funded provision. But what was evident from the findings and is in line with Hodgson's (2015) observations, is that the central task of college leadership is to respond to and shape the way learners experience their time at college.

Undesirable learner views can have destructive as well as constructive impact on the college (Walker and Logan, 2008). The latter may present the college with the opportunity to put things right and improve learners' career prospects, particularly as the job market becomes more competitive and the increasing pressure for FE colleges to equip post-16-year-olds with high-level skills. If the college has a policy of taking responsibility for quality improvement, learner views have the potential for the college to implement improvements that would benefit its students. Leadership for learning was observed to a considerable extent in Colleges A and B and to smaller extent in College C. Learners' negative opinions of their experience could damage the college's reputation if not properly investigated. When students select a college to pursue their study, they are essentially choosing their future. Courses available and the reputation of a college were amongst the top three primary factors influencing students' choice of a college in England (AoC, 2015). As FE

colleges experience competing demands for learners, ensuring students' experience is as positive as can be, is one of the responsibilities leaders must consider when evaluating their management approaches to leading, managing and organising programme provision.

5.3.2. Engagement with college employees

For this study, college employees refer to the teaching staff who contribute directly to learners' experience through teaching, training and management of the programme provision. In all the three cases, the evidence suggests that gaining the 'buy-in' (inputs) of all employees is vital in ensuring the provision is effective in meeting the needs of learners.

The study indicates that when a course is underperforming, and leaders decide to no longer run it, teachers and tutors are affected. Often, such a decision leads to negative feelings and a demoralised workforce. College A, for example, made tough decisions to withdraw the A level provision because of mediocre performance and the Heritage Conservation stonemasonry course because it no longer qualified for adult funding. In College B, I described why similar bold programme decisions were made. In both colleges, these decisions affected many teaching staff who taught on these programmes. Leaders and managers acknowledged the strong emotions these staff expressed when the decision was made to stop offering these programmes. Sometimes, reliance on cold facts to make decisions requires ignoring or paying secondary importance to sensitive human relationships (Nayan, 2011) where emotions could compromise the dominant rational approach (James and Jones, 2008).

Interestingly, Maringe (2012, p.7) raises the notion that:

> "*Organisational decision-making has an efficiency and effectiveness dimension on one hand, and a justice and fairness aspect on the other".*

Maringe (2012) suggests that decision efficiency and effectiveness are about the identification of the right solution involving minimum resources. Hoy and Tarter (2010, p. 355) urge decision-makers to "*make transparency in decision-making a habit of thought and action".* Implicit in the argument the authors make is that transparency in interactions is a catalyst for trust but in contrast, secrecy promotes distrust. In College C, the perceived lack of trust in the previous senior leadership team provided some evidence to suggest the latter. If leaders and managers have nothing to hide, then they should be open and authentic in their interactions with employees because trust enhances the acceptance of the decision and cooperation with the decision-makers (Hoy and Tarter, 2010; Maringe, 2012). The advocacy of the collaborative and participation approaches to decision-making in educational context is further validated by Hoy and Tarter (2010).

5.3.3. Engagement with employers

This study provides supporting evidence that engagement with employers took place across the colleges. However, the management approaches to leading and managing engagement with employers varied. Having made bold programme decisions to directly engage with relevant employers, Colleges A and B are

benefitting from the positive impact on career progression for its learners. For example, College A has increased the number of students on its engineering apprenticeship programme because of partnering with an international engineering company based in its community. This partnership has also enhanced the college's reputation as the 'college of choice' for engineering apprenticeships programme. Therefore, more learners are attracted to the college, thus increasing enrolment numbers. The college has also secured five part-time teachers from another national engineering company. These part-time employees teach specialist engineering subjects, stimulating the creation of a high-skilled engineering talent pool as well as providing teaching resources in this under-resourced discipline. College B has a similar experience within its health care programme. The college has developed its programme and created a talent pool of healthcare workers by collaborating with a high-profile healthcare organisation based in the community.

Whilst the broad programme provision in college C met local needs, the previous senior leaders appeared to not fully recognise the urgency with which they should bring about college-wide programme improvements in teaching and management of some courses. For example, not all apprentices and employers understood how college-based activities and on-the-job training fit together in the engineering provision. The professional practice in the motor vehicle workshop was under-developed and did not adequately reflect the industry or employers' expectations (Ofsted, 2014). Such observation was linked to the limited engagement with relevant motor mechanic employers.

It wa apparent that leaders and managers perceived employer engagement as an external factor which impacted on sound programme decision-making. As testified by the Principal of College A, the common feature of a failing programme provision "*is that it does not have a real employer engagement or industry focus".* Nonetheless, there is compelling evidence that colleges are not always able to offer what employers wanted and when they want it. I argue that there are three key reasons for this phenomenon: First, the training is not funded (see section 5.2.1) and therefore does not qualify for funding unless paid for by the employer; Second, there is limited or no staff expertise to deliver the programme provision (employee engagement) and third, the course the employer wanted was not planned for and therefore not in the strategic plan (see College A). This argument strengthens the need for meaningful employer engagement and involvement through well-defined and well-grounded college/employer relationships. It facilitates the employer's contribution to the evolution, initiation and monitoring of vocational programmes for which they have real concern and commitment, as they are then capable of delivering the skills-set that they need.

5.3.4. Concluding comments: The stakeholders

FE leaders and managers face many challenges when engaging with stakeholders (see Foster 2005; Wolf, 2011) to manage programme provision. Learners' experiences of their study have an increasingly powerful role in the leadership and management of programme provision. As curriculum staff are predominantly accountable for the quality of teaching and learning, a programme that fails to meet learners' expectations impacts on their experience and potentially the college reputation. When colleges engage with employers, there are potential mutual benefits of economic nature for both parties. As the colleges benefit from an increase in industry-rich teacher expertise and a more industry-focused

programme, (see Hodgson, 2015) the employers gain from a likely talent pool of skilled learners, subsequently closing the widening skills gap (see Wolf, 2011).

5.4. The role of senior leaders and managers

This section discusses the findings in relation to leadership and management activities, encompassing strategic leadership, accountability and quality improvement capability as internal factors that influence the processing of programme decision-making.

5.4.1. FE senior leadership and management

The findings reveal that the role of senior leaders and managers (Appendix D) is linked to their ability to understand, accurately interpret and process the opportunities and constraints that inform the context of their college. Thus, leaders and managers use their environment (see Figure 1) to help develop and set strategic college priorities through their mission and vision (see also the Environmental scanning section below). This rational approach to decision-making is supported by Hoy and Tarter (2010). That said, we know that the rational approach to decision-making relies on the availability of accurate data and information and the competence of the decision-makers (Nayab, 2011) to use "*critical thinking skills*" in order "*to optimise a decision*" (Barrett et al, 2005, p.4). As O'Sullivan (2011, p.4) succinctly commented "*decision-making process is more tangled than rational models acknowledge*".

The complexity of the FE environment means that the criteria for rational approaches to programme decision-making are often not met because of the unpredictable conditions within which FE colleges operate. These conditions call for more imaginative approaches to programme decision-making where "*multiple dimensions which encompass features from social, community, organisational and information"* (O'Sullivan, 2011, p.10) are considered in an amalgamation of rational and non-rational processes (Simon, 1987) for effective decision making.

The findings indicate that senior leaders do not act in isolation when making decisions about their programme provision. Collaborating with curriculum managers, they consider the effectiveness of leadership for learning, encompassing teaching and learning for learners and the performance of the programme provision. The collaborative approach to programme decision-making in FE colleges, is a significant finding and has not been documented before within the context of FE education and training.

Teachers' collaborative involvement when implementing programme change in other educational settings and organisational situations is documented in literature reviews such as James and Jones (2008); Hoy and Tarter (2010); O'Sullivan (2011) and Maringe (2012). Some of these researches, for example, James and Jones (2008) and Hoy and Tarter (2010) were conducted in school settings. It could be argued that the findings are applicable to FE colleges. In FE environments, Maringe (2012) identified the benefits of collaboration in broad organisational decision-making, particularly at first line leadership team level. O'Sullivan (2011) encourages educational decision-makers to work in collaboration, take and give advice to: gain vital information, frame decisions, refine practices and preferences, create further options, share responsibility and

self-affirm. Such guidance on collaborative approach could further augment our understanding of programme decision-making in FE. Whilst the collaborative approach to programme decision-making appears to play a mitigated role within individual decision-making (O'Sullivan's, 2011) concerns about the issues of accountability are noted and shared. Before I discuss accountability and the quality improvement capacity, I would like to discuss strategic leadership.

5.4.2. Strategic leadership

Strategic leadership emerged as a significant sub-theme of Theme 3 and is a key element in the processing of programme decision-making (see Figure 1). The expectation is that FE leaders should possess the intellectual ability to make sense of highly complex educational and business issues and have the creative powers to be visionary about the future (Harnish, 2013). The availability of the strategic plan for each college broadly confirms such expectation and provides evidence that FE leaders are likely to be attuned to the political, social and economic influences of the FE sector.

The strategic plans which document the colleges' vision, mission and strategic objectives provide evidence of forward planning and direction of the colleges. Consequently, FE leaders and managers must be skilful and have the operational expertise and knowledge to translate strategies into concrete plans. Two key focusses shape the strategic plan. First, leadership for learning and second, management approaches to leading and managing programme provision. Leaders and managers are expected to possess the capability to mobilise their workforce, raise their passion and commitment to teaching and learning, and enable others to achieve personal and organisational goals (Maringe, 2012).

FE leaders and managers should possess leadership and management skills, knowledge and experience relevant to their job description (see Appendix D). Accordingly, these leaders and managers must demonstrate emotional intelligence, resilience and interpersonal skills to nurture commitment to activities that could cost people their jobs should they fail (LSIS, 2013). The notion of strategic leadership paints a picture of the complete leader (Ancona et al, 2007), who is portrayed as:

> "*the flawless person at the top who's got it all figured out…but the sooner leaders stop trying to be all things to all people, the better off their organisations will be*" (p.4).

The findings illustrate the ability of senior leaders in FE colleges to recognise when input from key stakeholders is required. This is an important leadership attribute for implementing influential organisational change (Johnson and Kruse, 2009) where leadership at all levels directly or indirectly contributes to programme decision-making. As Maringe (2012, p.6) succinctly declares, *"…decisions are more easily attained when all employees have a stake in the decision-making."*

There was widespread feeling among the participants of the study that the operating environment, which has existed in the FE sector since incorporation, has naturally led to many leaders, governing bodies and FE colleges becoming heavily operationally focused. As one Principal commented, there is little time spent developing strategic plans based on values and evidence-based demand (see College A). The focus on making programme decision-making more strategically-

led presented a significant challenge for leaders and was succinctly summed up as the ability to move from "*a supply-led offer to a demand-led* [programme] *offer."* (see College B). A demand-led provision stipulates that programmes or courses are more tightly tailored to local employer needs, whereas withdrawing poorly performing courses, modifying existing programmes or designing a new one is a crucial stage in programme decision-making. "*Selecting and implementing the right strategy to deliver swift and smart decision-making*" (Hoy and Tarter, 2010, p.352) have become more important to operate within the demands of the changes of the funding policies in FE.

Lingfield (2012), describes FE in England as a developing and dynamic entity; naturally and properly diverse, it is a sector that places trust in the professionals who work within it to direct it, take its decisions and promulgate its priorities. For leaders and managers of FE colleges, courageous strategic leadership (LSIS, 2013) requires strong focus on leadership for learning and managing approaches to leading and managing programme provision that shape the future and learning of individuals who choose to study in the sector.

Environmental scanning

To respond to the challenges of programme decision-making, there is potential for a specific set of leadership skills that is increasingly seen being used around environmental scanning and strategic planning. The findings confirm the challenges senior leaders encounter as they engage in strategic leadership activities to ensure the provision is in line with local needs. As Lapin (2004, p.106) proposes, the "*trend spotting*" feature of external environmental scanning can be used to construct an institution's strategic plan by improving the likelihood that the organisation will be able to define its preferred future as opposed to an imposed future.

Whilst acknowledging the uncertainty associated with environmental scanning and forecasting, the findings reflect the benefits that FE colleges could be afforded, such as an "*advanced warning system*" (Lapin, 2004, p.106) for programme changes, as well as an opportunity for a competitive edge (described in section 5.2.2) as reflected by senior leaders of Colleges A and B. Conversely, the senior leaders were mindful that the strategic approach to programme decision-making carried different tensions. I have described some of these tensions in previous sections in engagement with employees and employers.

Hoy and Tarter (2010) urge leaders to exercise caution when making decisions grounded on unpredictable and uncertain environments. Decisions based on the 'uncertainty rules' often require ignoring complex information and using common wisdom, intuition from experience and making use of patterns of behaviour. *"The uncertainty rules are effective because it ignores the irrelevant and incorporates the relevant based on experience"* (Hoy and Tarter, 2010, p.354).

Securing adequate funding in the face of continuing austerity measures remains a pertinent problem in FE, particularly now that 16-to-18-year-olds education no longer enjoys ring-fenced state support (AoC, 2015). It is important to have the support of governors and their approval for and commitment to the strategic plan of the college. As one senior leader commented, "*the governors may be supportive of providing opportunities for adults, but, given the current funding policies, it is most likely that there is no funding to make the appropriate*

programme offer viable" (College A). Often, adult learners are not able or willing to pay for the course. The senior leadership team are therefore not able to support the provision, and this creates possible tension between governors and senior leaders. The findings point to such tension as noted in College C.

The importance of effective strategic leadership is recognised by the regulatory bodies of FE providers, namely Ofsted and government funding agencies. Based on the findings, strategic leadership requires leaders to anticipate and understand the FE environment (BIS/13/960, 2013). They must be objective, have the potential to look at the broader picture and possess the ability to use the information to make programme decisions that align with the context of the college. Although such findings are in line with Lapin's (2004) notion of environmental scanning, I argue that this situation has the potential to place a senior leader (namely the Principal) as the sole programme decision-maker. Yet, we know from the findings that an array of factors encompassing matters of accountability requires increased participation from curriculum managers, learners and employers, leading to the notion of collaboration when decisions are being made on the organisation of programme provision.

5.4.3. Accountability

Accountability is also a significant sub-theme to emerge from Theme 3 and has dual roles as an element of both processing and feedback of programme decision-making (see Figure 1). The burden of accountability weighs heavily on FE leaders and managers. Dealing with accountability often required them to possess high level of steely resilience in the face of external and internal pressures, as seen in all three colleges. Educational accountability (Thurlow, 2009) across leadership and management levels of the FE colleges appeared to be the norm. For example, most senior leaders spoke confidently and with clarity about how they accounted for the effectiveness of leadership for learning whilst curriculum managers understood their role in the implementation of management strategies to managing their provision.

FE college leaders who participated in the case studies were striving for more distributed accountability across all levels of the programme management to increase the effectiveness of course performance. Here, the feedback characteristic of accountability is identified in the framework (Figure 1). The desired impact of educational accountability, as attested to in FE colleges that are rated 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted, has an increasing affinity with collaborative, yet satisficing, modes of programme decision-making. The mitigated role within programme decision-making as characterised by the collaborative approach (O'Sullivan, 2011), possibly contributes towards more effective decision-making. However, the contested issue of accountability remains as to who should take the ultimate decision on behalf of the college.

It is evident from the study that a genuine collaborative team effort is required when programme decisions are made and where leadership is distributed throughout the college organisational structure (see Figure 2: Appendix C). The research findings align closely with the notion of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2001; Harris, 2004; Spillane et al., 2004). The assertion is that leadership does not reside solely at the top of the organisations but dispersed at multiple levels across the organisation.

The establishment of Ofsted and inspection of FE colleges have raised accountability for leaders to new heights. For many, the weight of accountability remains a source of stress and anxiety (Hodgson, 2015). When making decisions about their programme provision, leaders acknowledged that they must consider how they might have to justify them to an inspection team. A poor Ofsted report can signal the end of the Principal's career at best and at worse the trajectory of the entire senior leadership team as seen in College C. The development of the internet, increased technological awareness and heightened transparency means that Ofsted reports and a wide range of other FE college details, are now readily available in the public domain in a way that was inconceivable two decades ago. Leaders and managers acknowledged the impact of college information, particularly learners' opinions and Ofsted reports, on the college reputation.

Against a background of a demand and command system of accountability (Hodgson, 2015), FE Colleges are accountable to learners and their parents, employees and a range of regulatory bodies such as Ofsted, the DfE, Examination Boards, the Audit Commission and arguably employers. The findings from the study and Hodgson's (2015) use of the term legitimacy of accountability confirm that FE leaders and managers are cognisant of the increase in accountability to their stakeholders and the communities. The findings are also in line with observations (Ofsted, 2013, 2015b; Hodgson, 2015) that some colleges have realigned their programme provision by being responsive to the demands of: local needs (using local labour market intelligence); funding policies; regulators and legislations. The prominent level of accountability influences leaders and requires them to use programme decision-making strategies to organise their programme provision. The evidence presented in the findings related to this approach as leaders and managers increasingly made use of central data as well as the opportunities and constraints of their context to make programme decisions.

5.4.4. Quality improvement capability

In the current climate, FE colleges are criticised for two key shortcomings. First, limitation "…*to improve the quality of technical provision and present it as a valid educational path…"* and second, its inadequacy *"… to equip youngsters with the skills they need and employers want*" (Wilshaw, 2016, p.6). These opinions resonate with the issues being researched in this study and articulated by a senior leader that FE colleges succeed or fail by the quality of what they do. As such, quality improvement is another key processing element of the framework (see Figure 1) and plays a crucial part when analysing programme decision-making.

As seen in Theme 3, there was an expressed view that problems with the quality of a programme are largely driven by failure to spot poor standards with the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. The implications are wide-ranging not least resulting in poor learner outcomes including the failure to equip learners with the right skills to progress on to their next step. The plethora of diverse qualifications, (21,924 qualifications as quoted by Ofqual, 2016) which often fail to match the skills gaps in the local and national labour market (Hodgson, 2015) does not help the situation. However, it is not always the case that good or poor teaching and learning correlate with the high or low achievement rates for learners. As reported by the Ofsted report for College C, "*the organisational culture is such that they [senior leaders] do not all take full responsibility for their role in quality improvement*" (Ofsted, 2014).

Ofsted and the DfE are government agencies responsible for carrying out quality assurance activities and as mentioned earlier, can claim legitimacy of accountability (Hodgson, 2015). Learners and employers may indirectly act as likely quality assurance stakeholders and their views about the programme provision and performance must not be ignored (Walker and Logan, 2008). Students' learning experience and employers' partnership (where applicable) enables increasingly important and continuous feedback. These elements form part of the quality improvement management strategies and are considered when managing programme provision and making programme decisions at strategic level.

5.4.5. Concluding comments: The role of senior leaders and managers

Decision-making is probably the most significant role of leadership, encompassing aspects of organisational existence (Elsass and Graves, 1997; Johnson and Kruse, 2009; Hoy and Tarter, 2010). Naturally, FE leaders and managers aspire to make competent programme decisions all the time. The essence of the role of leaders and managers is to strike the right balance between adopting a strategically focussed and sensitive understanding to respond to the broader local and regional priorities whilst providing effective leadership for learning. Such balance includes identifying suitable management strategies and implementing effective solutions when deciding how the programme provision meets the needs of the stakeholders.

Set against a background of leading and managing complex educational businesses, the study found that effectiveness in leadership and management profoundly impact on programme decision-making. As Hancock (2013, p.1) asserts:

> "*strong and effective leadership are essential if further education is to take its proper place as an engine for growth in local areas; delivering high quality teaching and learning which meets local needs*."

Evidence from the study also reveals that where leadership and management are insufficiently strong, leaders and managers are not firmly focussed on key priorities of leadership for learning. Accordingly, the efficacy of management approaches to leading and managing programme provision is under-developed.

5.5. Limitations of the research enquiry

The senior leaders and managers interviewed appear to understand their roles and responsibilities when making decisions about their programme provision. However, what is not clear is the extent to which they are sensitive to their own limitations and expertise in programme decision-making. It may be that this is an activity they do not engage in or it could be reflected on the limitations of the research methodology. Although beyond the scope of the study, other issues such as leaders' empathy and emotions (see James and Jones, 2008) could affect programme decision-making.

The time-served element is likely to have influenced the responses of the participants. The Principal of College A has been in post for eight years, whereas

the Principal of College B for less than two years. The Principal of College C was a temporary appointment and has been in post for less than six months. Other interviewees, vice principals and curriculum managers have been in post between two and six years. It takes time to develop expertise (Hoy and Tarter, 2010). If leaders and managers are new in post, it is possible that their knowledge and experience in leadership for learning and their ability to identify and implement management strategies to leading and managing programme provision are not as well developed. Therefore, they may have limited expertise in programme decision-making.

There are two key difficulties associated with using interviews. First, there is the notion of the iceberg effect of using interviews (McNamara, 1999). Beneath an array of observable features such as eye contact, facial expressions and body language, lay unobservable sources of information about the interviewees which, despite being potentially more important in enabling us to decode data, is nevertheless practically inaccessible to the interviewer. Maringe (2012, p.10) endorses this view:

> *"Lying below the iceberg are peoples' histories, their values, beliefs, motives, emotional states, past experiences, assumptions and biases."*

On reflection, my interviews did little to uncover these. It was beyond the scope of the research to dig below the 'iceberg'.

The second challenge in conducting interviews is that of standardising the interview environment for all interviewees (Maringe, 2012). I was fortunate enough to carry out all interviews in the interviewees' offices. Consequently, and in accordance with Kvale (1983), this reduced the possible political and power dynamics associated with interview spaces and which have been known to have an impact on the outcomes of interviews.

5.6. Summary of discussion, linking emergent themes to the research questions

To facilitate the examination of the research questions (RQs), I developed a simple framework based on the open systems model. Based on the analysis of the data, the undertaking of programme decision-making in FE colleges can be categorised into three themes and significant sub-themes. The sub-themes are broadly interpreted as internal or external factors that influence programme decision-making. As a reminder, the RQs are:

RQ1. *What are the internal and external factors that affect programme provision in an FE college?*
RQ2. *How do these factors affect programme decision-making and why?*
RQ3. *What are the consequences and impacts of programme decision-making for the stakeholders and the FE college?*

5.6.1. Open systems framework

I have used a simple framework (Figure 1) based on the open systems model to frame the construct of the decision-making system. The framework was constructed from an understanding of the literature review and relates to the environment pertaining to the FE sector in which FE leaders and managers carry out programme decision-making. This representation allows for the inclusion of all FE colleges in England. Making purposeful and effective programme decisions involve inputs, outputs, processes and feedbacks afforded by internal and external factors as illustrated by the framework. FE leaders' and managers' ability to use the opportunities and constraints presented by their environment, context and locality is crucial for effective programme decision-making.

5.6.2. Theme 1: The FE college context

Sub-themes: funding policies and programme provision.

In relation to RQ1, funding policies (external factors) and the performance of programme provision (internal factor) are fundamental influences affecting the programmes colleges offer. So, how do these external and internal factors affect decision-making and why (RQ2)? In sections 5.2.1, 5.2.2 and 5.2.3, I have discussed how/why the opportunities and constraints presented by funding policies and the performance of programme provision programme inform the context of the college and affect programme decision-making.

Although this is a new research-based finding in relation to FE programme decision-making, the notion of context in decision-making is not new. Hoy and Tarter (2010) advocate the need to be mindful and vigilant in our perceptions of organisational events with an appreciation for subtleties and novelties of context that can improve our foresight and functioning. I argue that the subtleties and novelties of FE context contribute significantly to the "*complexity and messiness*" (O'Sullivan, 2011, p.3) of programme decision-making process. This reasoning (which encompasses RQ3), may explain why a third of FE colleges are failing to make changes to their programme, underestimating the significance of employer views and relationship and consequently not meeting the needs of the communities they serve (Ofsted, 2015).

Furthermore, and in relation to RQ3, the research demonstrates that senior leaders and managers of FE colleges who develop a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and constraints presented by context of their college, adopt strategic leadership. These leaders develop strategic plans that focus on leadership for learning and management approaches to leading and managing programme provision, encompassing programme decision-making.

Expanding on RQ3, FE leaders concede that sometimes the 'best fit' programme decision-making strategy is simply a desirable one that causes fewer unanticipated consequences for the learners, employees and employers (see section 5.3). The 'best fit' programme decision-making approach, as seen in Colleges A and B, led to innovative and entrepreneurial activities which helped the colleges meet the needs of local and the wider communities. FE leaders and managers use labour market information, referred to as 'environmental scanning' to develop new provision and expand the existing ones. Where strategic planning was lacking, and the use of local knowledge underdeveloped, these have

contributed to the ineffectiveness of the programme provision of the college. The body of evidence presented for College C supports this contention. Arguably, not all FE colleges which underperform cease operations. There are other factors at play. The study reveals that agencies with legitimacy of accountability often hold FE colleges to account.

5.6.4. Theme 2: The FE stakeholders: framing the programme decision-making

Sub-themes: learners' experience and views; engagement with employers and curriculum employees.

Within Theme 2, one external and two internal factors are identified. In response to RQ1, learners' learning experience at college and the effectiveness of employee engagement are internal factors that affect programme decision-making. Engagement with employers emerged as an external factor and is recognised as a valuable contributor to the effectiveness of programme decision-making.

In sections 5.3.2 and 5.3.3 and linked to RQ2, I discussed how and why these factors affect programme decision-making. Linked with RQ3, the impact of learners' learning experience at college was particularly noted in relation to programmes that underperform. Leaders and managers acknowledge the importance of positive and negative learner voice specifically when a course is failing.

Given the vocational emphasis on skills development, the role of local and regional employers is significant when senior leaders undertake programme decision-making. Employers' engagement in education and training is generally stimulated by those who supply it (Ofsted, 2010). Within the findings, and in relation to RQ2, there was a view that leaders and managers of FE colleges form effective partnership with employers where they value each other's skills and expertise. Relating to RQ3, most leaders and managers strive to respond timely to local needs and government interventions by taking a leading role in adapting their programme to meet the stakeholders' requirements.

Leaders' responsiveness to stakeholders' concerns is in line with Hoy and Tarter's (2010, p.352) cycle of activities of "*framing the problem and analysing the difficulties"* when responding to programme decision-making in a rational and purposeful manner. The study provides evidence that FE colleges rely on their senior leaders and managers to engage in a combination of rational, satisficing and collaborative strategies when making programme decisions. Such a collegial approach has the potential to add legitimacy to the outcomes (Rixom, 2011) when making programme decisions.

Focussing on the internal and external factors linked with RQ1 and RQ2, the study suggests that leaders apply the 'Framing Rule' when addressing programme performance which may affect how programme decisions are made. Framing or defining the problem (Hoy and Tarter, 2010) results in constructive actions based on contexts. The dynamics resulting from the interaction between the FE environments, inputs, processes, outputs and feedbacks, offer increased insight into the role of senior leaders in their ability to make astute programme decisions and allocate accountability of the performance of the provision. Generally when linked with RQ3, once the decision is made, it is also about mobilising employees

at all levels of the college to account for implementing management approaches for effective programme provision. Furthermore, linking with RQ3, this involves monitoring the quality of teaching and learning of the programme so that all learners make the progress they should, not just to achieve their qualifications but more significantly to develop relevant skills and knowledge. Providing leadership for learning and as Hoy and Tarter (2011) argue, understanding leadership capability at all levels, facilitates the development of organisational conditions that involve those with the relevant expertise and interest in decision-making and promote positive social norms. For example, fostering openness so that participation in decision-making increases acceptance of decisions and instils trust in interpersonal relations.

5.6.5. Theme 3: The role of senior leaders and managers

Sub-themes: strategic leadership, accountability and quality improvement capability.

Theme 3 emerged following widespread acknowledgement among FE senior leaders and managers of the need to fully understand their roles and responsibilities as custodians for programme decision-making. Guided by the college strategic plan, programme decisions are made at senior leadership and management level. FE leaders recognised that the effectiveness of the leadership and management team is highly dependent on their ability to shape the college's programme provision strategies. In relation to RQ1, I consider strategic leadership as an internal factor and the glue that binds the elements of programme decision-making in FE colleges. When strategic leadership is linked to RQ2 and to some extent RQ3, it is the capability of FE senior leaders and managers to undertake strategic planning and make informed decisions about their programme provision for the stability and financial sustainability of the college.

Theme 3 also identified the complexity of accountability and the quality improvement capability as internal factors and therefore linked to RQ1. These factors form part of management approaches to leading and managing programme provision. I argue that FE leaders and managers are accountable for securing effective programme performance through their roles and responsibilities and shape the experience of learners at the college.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

6.0. Introduction

In this closing chapter, a summary of the salient points of the study is presented. Three areas are covered: reflection on the research enquiry; reflection on the findings and what has been learned from the study; contributions to knowledge and practice.

6.1. Reflection: The research enquiry

6.1.1. What I set out to do

The enquiry was born out of a genuine desire to understand programme decision-making in FE colleges. As a FE practitioner and researcher, I am empowered a critical positioning and afforded an insider knowledge of FE colleges. My interest in the leadership and management of programme provision led to the formulation of the research aim: '*an analysis of programme decision-making in further education colleges in England.*'

Following on from an initial investigation into the research topic, I reviewed a range of literature which provided a sound understanding of the theories, models and complexity of decision-making. The literature contributed three-folds towards the development of the RQs. First, to identify gaps in the literature, second, to explore the scope of the study, and third, to enable greater understanding of the factors that affect and influence programme provision in FE colleges, the key people involved in making programme decisions and the impact on key stakeholders.

Informed by the literature review and the RQs, I created a simple framework based on the open systems model to facilitate the analysis of the internal and external factors, inputs, processes, outputs and feedback observed in programme decision-making environment in FE colleges. I identified that the senior leaders and curriculum managers would be the most suitable groups from whom to collect the data because of their knowledge and ability to give authoritative and accurate information about programme decision-making in their college.

I used semi-structured interviews to gather information about programme decision-making. The participants willingly shared their experiences and knowledge, enabling the use of practitioners' responses and data to answer the RQs. In addition, documentary evidence from the self-assessment reports, Ofsted reports, strategic plans, mission and vision statements and prospectus from each college provided stimuli for questions and corroboration of answers.

6.1.2. Summary of the findings relating to the research questions

Three clear interconnected themes emerged. These themes provided evidence that the internal and external factors which shape programme decision-making for the provision of education and training for post-16 learners including adult learners, are common to all FE colleges. A summary of the key findings focusing on the impact of the internal and external factors in relation to the RQs is included in Table 2.

Research Questions	Internal factors: impact on leadership and management of programme decision-making	External factors: impact on leadership and management of programme decision-making
RQ1. *What are the internal and external factors that affect programme provision in an FE college?*	Internal factors o Effectiveness of programme provision o Quality improvement capability o Learners' learning experience o Employees' engagement o Accountability o Strategic leadership	External factors o Funding policies o Engagement with employers
RQ2. *How do these factors affect programme decision-making and why?*	***Programme provision*** • driven by leadership for learning and the implementation of management strategies • the effectiveness and viability of courses • opportunities and constraints of college context • contributes to the contextualisation of FE colleges ***Quality improvement capability,*** • effectiveness and performance of courses • Organisation of programme provision ***Learners' learning experience*** • impact of their views on the reputation of the college • management of learners' learning experience ***Employees' engagement*** • accountability for delivery of teaching and learning • role in supporting learners' learning experience ***Accountability*** • focus on leadership for learning • focus on implementing management strategies to leading and managing programme provision • managed at all levels of organisational structure ***Strategic leadership*** • leadership for learning including strategic planning capability of the senior leaders and managers • ability to use role to evaluate provision and make strategic decisions including financial security of the college	***Funding policies*** • drive the way learners are funded • inform the management of programme provision for financial security of FE colleges • inform opportunities and constraints of programme provision • establish accountable to funding agencies • contributes to the contextualisation of FE colleges ***Engagement with employers*** • contributes to the management strategies to leading and managing programme provision • contributes to skills development for learners and employees • contributes to make the programme provision more relevant. • informs opportunities and constraints of programme provision
RQ3. *What are the consequences and impacts of programme decision-making for the stakeholders and the FE college?*	***For the stakeholders*** • meaningful engagement with learners for positive learner outcomes • accountability for programme provision by curriculum staff at all levels • engagement with employers for skills development and relevance of programme provision ***For the college*** • increase focus on leadership for learning • increase focus on management strategies to leading and managing programme provision • raise awareness of impact of funding on stability and financial security for the college • interpretation of opportunities and constraints presented by the context of the college • creation and implementation of strategic leadership • transparency of programme decision-making with increased legitimacy of accountability	

Table 2: A summary of the key findings focussing on the internal and external factors in relation to the research questions

6.2. Reflection: The findings

This section reflects on what has been learned from the study, encompassing leadership for learning and management approaches to leading and managing programme provision. The complexity of FE colleges places the leadership of senior leaders and managers at the centre of programme decision-making.

6.2.1. Implications for leadership and management of programme decision-making

The findings illustrate that leadership for learning is a key priority for FE college leaders and managers. Their interpretation of the opportunities and constraints presented by their locality and internal and external factors, influence the context of their college. The context, purpose and what the college can achieve to improve their programme provision appear to be the aspirations of FE leaders and managers. Their engagement with the stakeholders and execution of their strategic roles can be considered along with the main decision-making approaches (Hoy and Tarter, 2010) that relate to programme decision-making within complex educational settings. The findings show that the internal and external factors are linked and that increasingly, FE leaders and managers used these to influence and inform the strategic directions of the college to achieve programme decision-making that would improve learners' learning experience, increase engagement with employers and improve the financial security of the college. FE leaders and managers who prioritise leadership for learning constantly review these factors to inform the effectiveness of their programme provision. They are acquiring stability, sustainability and financial security for their college.

The findings show elements of management approaches that are implemented when leading and managing programme provision. These elements (internal and external factors) are summarised in section 6.1.2 (Table 2). Consider, for example, the challenges of the opportunities and constraints presented by the funding policies and when linked with accountability, have significant influence on programme decision-making. Leadership in action (Nutt, 2006) culminates in the use of the leader's influence to manage the behaviour of others (Chapman, 2001) when making decisions about programme provision. Leaders and managers often use poor programme performance and lack of accountability as reasons to stop running the course, sometimes resulting in the loss of curriculum staff. Similarly, at senior leadership and management level, poor accountability for overall programme provision performance has contributed to resignations of senior leaders and managers from their posts. The consequences of programme performance and accountability have social as well as political implications.

The complexity of further education and programme decision-making

FE in England is a flag-bearer of vocational education. Whilst two thirds of FE colleges offer good vocational programmes, facilitating its learners relevant employment or a direct route into further or higher education, the observation is that the programme provision of a third of colleges is often poorly designed and does not provide young people with relevant skills and training (Ofsted, 2016). This is a contentious issue. Critics (see Coffield, 2017) argue that the imperatives that shape the requirement of the inspection regime and the expectations that underlie the Ofsted framework should be questioned, particularly in relation to the

ways in which they have effects on different colleges in differing locality and context. The situation of College C may be a case in point. Notwithstanding what we perceive of Ofsted and government policy, Powell (2017, p.136) maintains that "*there has been a degree of consistency for the colleges caught up in the 'policy amnesia' and 'the failures of policy learning'.*

The findings indicate that inadequate attention to leadership for learning and poor management of strategies to leading and managing programme provision were often contributory reasons for ineffective programme provision. These observations were more prominent where leaders and managers were less able to create structures and processes (Maringe, 2012) that facilitate effective management and organisation of programme provision. The findings show that leaders' interpretation and processing of the internal and external factors significantly influence programme decision-making in their educational context. The failure to interrogate poor practices and create a sense of purpose across the whole college leads to an *"erosion of accountability and ambition for students"* (Jupp, 2015, p.180). The consequences for failure to make effective programme decision-making are serious for all stakeholders, but most importantly for the learners. Notwithstanding the FE college locality and context, as a curriculum manager, it hard to ignore the issue when it is reported that too many 16-to-19-year-olds are not gaining the skills to secure employment in high-skilled jobs, resulting in significant unemployment for this age group (Ofsted, 2016).

The findings indicate that effective programme decision-making requires a collaborative approach between leaders and managers through intelligible understanding of what learners and employers want and what teachers do in classrooms and workshops. Such accomplishment of leadership for learning contributes to and forms part of the programme decision-making process and practice. Inputs and feedback from these stakeholders are assessed, actioned and reviewed. These inputs come from learners' informed opinions on their experience at college, employers' needs and their recommendations on the content of the programme and teachers' expertise and views of their work (Hodgson, 2015). This rational approach to programme decision-making facilitates the development and support for learners, employers and teachers in ways that work for the benefit of all stakeholders. Such an approach characterises the satisficing decision-making strategies (Simon, 1987; O'Sullivan, 2011), where leaders can make the best decisions that are desirable for the context of their college. This notion also confirms that FE leadership is complex, relational, contextual and dependent on the individuals who are exercising it (Jupp, 2015).

The study confirms that to carry out effective programme decision-making, senior leaders and managers must be skilful in using the external environment to scan, forecast and exploit the opportunities and constraints presented by the context of their college, hence initiate management strategies to leading and managing programme provision. Leaders who strike a fine balance on a settled partnership between the college and employers not only benefit from employers' occupational expertise for programme updates but also gain valuable work-related experience for the learners. As employers have an increasingly powerful role in the construction of vocational qualifications (Fisher and Simmons, 2012), this partnership depends, for its continued viability, on employers' willingness to provide training placements and this in turn depends on their sense of ownership for developing learners' skills and knowledge in the vocational expertise (McLoughlin (2013).

The study illustrates how the impact of engagement with stakeholders is of significant interest when analysing programme decision-making. Having a clear management strategy to leading and managing programme provision which focuses on ensuring the programme addresses the needs of both local and regional priorities is paramount. To do this, and in line with the priorities of leadership for learning, astute leaders and managers enlist the support of employers and learners to plan and develop their programme. The findings demonstrate that positive engagement with a range of stakeholders led to effective programme decisions and implementation. Analysis of the evidence indicates that a combination of low level of learner satisfaction, resulting from mediocre quality of teaching and learning, and poor leadership and management of the programme strategies impact on the performance of provision.

The study shows that for effective programme decision-making, it is not sufficient to simply develop good relationships with employers and LEPs. There are other variables within the multifaceted and complex FE environment that programme decision-makers must fully understand. This study bears witness that the implementation of management approaches to leading and managing programme provision, encompassing programme effectiveness, performance and accountability, confirms Simon's (1987) and Langley et al's (1995) assertion that the criteria for programme decision-making is often uncertain. The ability of FE leaders and managers as programme decision-makers to use centrally available management data to compare the performance of their programme against national trend is vital in informing sound programme decision-making.

6.2.2. Funding policy and political influences on programme decision-making

The study indicates that FE colleges draw political attention and intervention through funding and legislations (Wolf, 2011). Funding and quality assurance agencies are holding FE leaders to account (Hodgson, 2015). The legislations and conditions of funding for 16-to-19-year-olds and the reduction of the adult funding budget in the current climate of public spending thrift are cases in point. With such a complex setting of policy and funding in place, it is no wonder FE leaders are struggling to make sense of the political impact (Green, 2013) of their programme decisions.

The study re-enforces the image problem of FE colleges as institutions that offer a second chance to learners. It would be naïve of me not to acknowledge that FE is perceived as able to absorb students who do not fit the profile of other educational providers (Hodgson, 2015), as a matter of government policy and political influence. It is my reflection that in addition to the funding regime, on two counts FE colleges are perceived to operate on a deficit model. FE colleges appear to compensate, firstly, for schools that have failed to equip learners with the skills of reading or writing and to prepare them for employment; secondly, for employers who are reluctant to recruit and train FE students. There is a case to argue that these reflections underpin the issue of reputation for FE colleges and is exacerbated when a college receives a 'Requires Improvement' or Inadequate' grade by the inspectorate for a perceived failure to a provide good standard of education and training. These perceptions have bearings on programme decision-making and the colleges' ability to deliver provision of vocational education. The

issue of trust in the sector's ability to deliver quality lifelong learning to bridge the skills gaps in the local and national labour market appears to be questioned.

Reflecting on the range of programmes offered by the colleges, the study provides evidence that generally, these meet the needs of the stakeholders including community groups, businesses and employers. This suggests aspects of social, economic and political steerage on programme decision-making. FE college leaders are facing a challenging time. They recognise the need to connect with learners, employees and employers whilst attempting to strike a meaningful balance between pursuing training in the workplace, academic studies and lifelong learning. The variance between these diverse programmes colleges offer, compared to their fellow education providers in schools and higher education gives rise to additional complexities. The intricacy of the remits of FE colleges presents significant challenges for many leaders who strive to maintain a sense of coherent professional and impartial status in their college's external setting. As outlined by the framework (Figure 1), keeping such a stance is important when making decisions about the courses on offer.

The study offers some insight of the political influence as a result of constant national policy steering that have impacted on the FE sector since incorporation. Chapter One provided evidence that each successive government has meddled with such a complicated organism as FE, requiring leaders to respond promptly and diligently to interventions and policies. FE colleges continue to encounter strong headwinds from funding regimes and national policy levers that deflect it from its mission. The study also raises awareness of the impact of the political influence on programme decision-making. Senior leaders should be astute in their interpretation of the political landscape, not only of their college setting but also of the FE sector.

6.3. The research enquiry: contributions to knowledge and practice

The research reported in this thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge and practice in the following ways.

The role of FE senior leaders and managers places their capability for practicing leadership for learning, which is characterised by a strong focus on learners' learning experience, at the centre of programme decision-making. Evidence from the study indicates that FE leaders and managers who prioritise leadership for learning focus on effective management approaches to leading and managing the organisation of programme provision. Such focus informs the strategic directions of the college to achieve improvement in learners' learning experience, increase engagement with employers and improve the financial security of the college.

Programme decision-making is significantly influenced by the opportunities and constraints presented by the locality of the FE college and internal and external factors. Six internal factors were identified: effectiveness of programme provision, quality improvement capability, learners' learning experience, employees' engagement, accountability and strategic leadership. The external factors included: funding policies and engagement with employers. These factors exert influences of a political, economic and social nature on programme decision-making.

The study shows that since incorporation, FE colleges are competing with other education and training providers where financial, socio-economic and often political considerations determine practice. Consequently, FE leaders and managers are revising their programme provision using a range of competing choices about their educational environment whilst under a pressure to meet local needs for the provision of vocational education and training. Correspondingly, FE leaders' interpretation and processing of the internal and external factors significantly influence programme decision-making in their educational context. To further strengthen the leadership for learning and the organisation of programme provision, FE college leaders and managers must use management information on internal and external factors. These will provide inputs for processing programme decision strategies and outputs for implementable and effective programme decision-making.

Effective programme decision-making requires a collaborative approach where the involvement and participation of stakeholders provide a solution-driven method to managing programme provision for positive changes. The study provides evidence that FE leaders and managers must possess leadership skills to deploy effective strategic leadership informed by intelligent understanding of key stakeholders and reliable management information that encompasses accountability. However, such accountability must be handled with care in the decision-making process.

The research also shows that collaborative approaches to programme decision-making, infused with elements of rational and satisficing processes make the challenging practice of programme decision-making more effective. Consequently, the study contributes to educational leadership literature, where rational approaches to decision-making are favoured (O'Sullivan, 2011) re-enforcing Law and Glover's (2000) axiom that decisions should be rational rather than intuitive. As the overall effectiveness of FE colleges continues to decline, (Ofsted, 2016) leadership for learning practice is a priority for FE leaders and managers. The research has shown that FE leaders and managers should therefore focus on understanding the opportunities and constraints that inform the context of their colleges. Such understanding should be used to implement management strategies to leading, managing and improving the programme provision for post-16-year-olds.

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Appendix A

Letter of consent to research participants

To:
From: Daisy Walsh
Date: January 2015

An invitation to participate in a research enquiry: An analysis of programme decision-making in further education colleges in England

Dear Participants,

My name is Daisy Walsh. I am studying for an Education Doctorate at the University of Bath.

I am self-funding my research which has a working title of 'An Analysis of programme decision-making in further education colleges in England'.

I am writing to seek your participation in a semi-structured interview. I append the lines of enquiry below. Your participation will be greatly appreciated as I anticipate that you will bring meaningful and significant contribution to this very important topic area of the FE sector.

All data gathered in this research will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. No identifying information will be used. You will be sent a transcript of the interview for your approval before I use any of your quotes in my thesis. In addition, a copy of the findings as they appear in my thesis will be forwarded to you in due course. As mentioned, the findings will be fully anonymised in accordance to the University of Bath strict research guidelines.

I know how very busy you all are and I thank you in advance for your assistance.

Yours faithfully,

Daisy Walsh

Lines of enquiry: below are the research questions which will form the basis of the semi-structured interview.

i. *What are the internal and external factors that affect programme offer in an FE college?*
ii. *How do these factors affect programme decision-making and why?*
iii. *What are the consequences for outcomes for learners and the college financial position and the impacts of programme decision-making on FE colleges?*

Appendix B

Outline of research enquiry to willing participants

To:
From: Daisy Walsh
Date: February 2015

Dear Participant,

Thank you for giving your consent to participate in this research enquiry for my thesis.

As promised, I have put together an outline of the research which gives you some background and context for my study. Please see attached document. I have included the key research questions that make up the lines of enquiry. I have also added extended questions that will further assist in the gathering of data and information on the research topic.

I look forward to meeting with you soon.
Kind regards
Daisy

Research topic: An analysis of programme decision-making in further education colleges in England

Background of the research enquiry:
Making decisions about programme provision is a significant activity undertaken by FE leaders and managers. According to Ofsted, the educational and training programme provision in a third of FE colleges in England, is often poorly designed and does not provide post-16 year olds with the skills and training they need to gain employment in key sectors of the economy. This observation was reported in Ofsted Annual Report for 16 to 19 study programme provision inspected between 1 September 2015 and 31 August 2016. The leadership and management of these FE colleges are not making informed and robust decisions about the programmes they offer to respond to the needs of learners, employers and the local communities they serve. Programme provision decision-making at strategic level does not set realistic visions to achieve stability and sustainability of FE colleges and there is not enough leadership capacity within the FE sector to enable improvement in education and training. These concerns form the rationale for this research enquiry into 'an analysis of programme decision-making in FE colleges in England'.

Method of data collection:
I will be using the case study methodology. I am interested in gathering data and information from key FE leaders and managers who routinely make decisions about the programme provision in their college. To ensure my study is robust, I am also interested in reading key college documents such as your Self-Assessment Report (SAR), Strategic Plans, Mission and Vision statements and Programme Prospectus.

Target participants:
The target participants to be interviewed for this research are Principals, Vice Principals and Curriculum Managers. The focus of the study is predominantly on programme decision-making by senior leaders and managers in relation to learners aged 16-19 in FE colleges. Your participation will be greatly appreciated as I anticipate that you will bring meaningful and significant contribution to this very important leadership activity and topic area of the FE sector.

Appendix B (continued)

Participation, confidentiality and interviews:
Participation in my research enquiry is voluntary and I greatly appreciate your contribution. All the data gathered in this research will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. No identifying information will be used. I will send you a transcript of the interview for your approval before I use any of your quotes in my thesis. In addition, a copy of the findings as they appear in my thesis will be forwarded to you. As mentioned, the findings will be fully anonymised in accordance to the University of Bath strict research guidelines.

Benefits of the study:
The potential benefits of the study include a deeper understanding of programme decision-making, encompassing leadership and management of programme provision as described above in the 'Background of the research enquiry'. The findings of the study could contribute towards the few research papers that examine programme decision-making in FE colleges, considering the important and central role FE colleges occupy in the learning and skills education sector.

Research questions (lines of enquiry and extended questions):
The following research questions will assist to achieve the aim of this research enquiry:

iv. *What are the internal and external factors that affect programme offer in an FE college?*
v. *How do these factors affect programme decision-making and why?*
vi. *What are the consequences and the impacts of programme decision-making on FE colleges?*

The following extended questions will further assist in the gathering of data and information on the research topic:

1. *What are your roles and responsibility in making decisions about the programme provision in your college?*
2. *How are decisions about programme provision made in your college?*
3. *Can you describe the effectiveness of the programme provision in your college? How do you measure effectiveness?*
4. *From your perspective, what are the factors that cause a programme or course to experience high or low performance and why?*
5. *Can you identify and describe two or more programmes or courses that senior college leaders and managers have had to make a decision about its future? Tell me what happened?*
6. *What measures and actions did you put in place to raise the programme or course performance?*
7. *What were the key factors that made the difference in the outcomes of programme decision?*

Appendix C

Organisational structure common to most further education colleges showing leadership and management structure in red boundaries

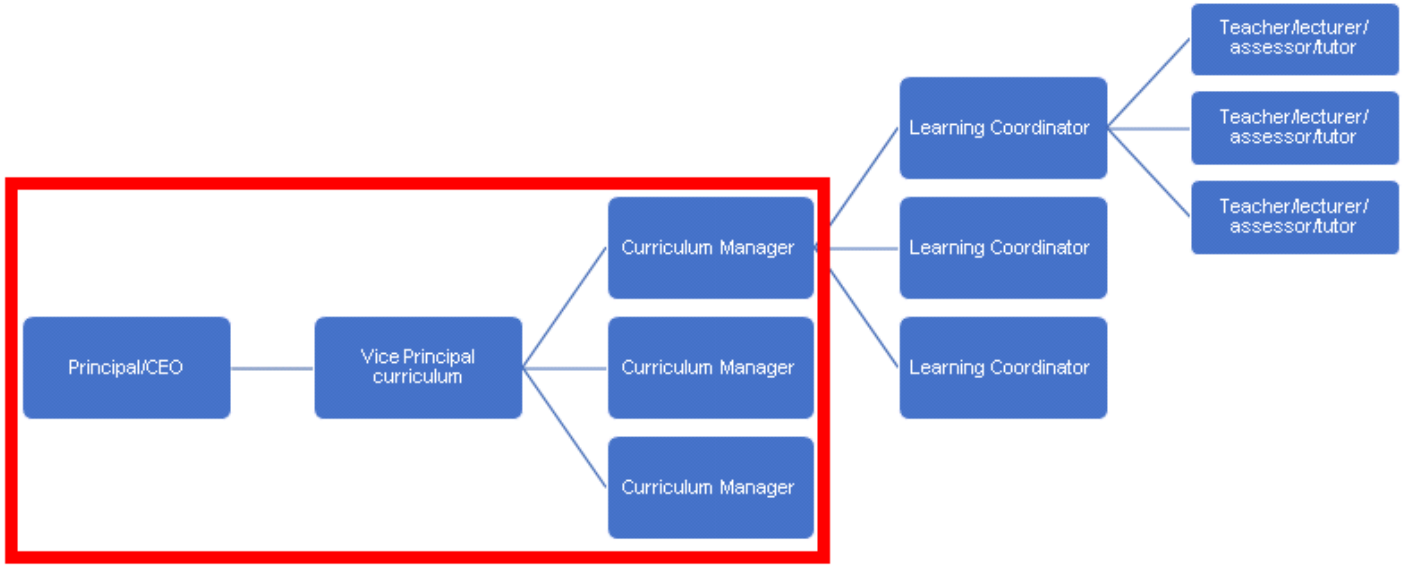

Figure: 2 - Organisational structure showing leadership and management structure in red boundaries

An explanation of Figure 2: Appendix C

In most FE colleges, the Principal is also the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). It is common for an FE college to have a Vice Principal, responsible for curriculum. In many FE colleges, there may be three or more Curriculum managers with middle managers' roles and responsibilities. An FE college may also have several Learning Coordinators whose role would be for coordinating programmes in addition to carrying out teaching and learning responsibilities. These learning coordinators often do not have management responsibilities.

Appendix D

General description of key roles relating to responsibilities of programme provision of the Principal/CEO, Vice Principal and curriculum managers in most further education colleges in England

	Principal/Chief Executive Officer	**Vice Principal of Curriculum**	**Curriculum Manager**
Generic key job roles relating to responsibilities of programme provision	To ensure that the college meets the provisions of its Strategic Plan and assist the Board to maintain it in an up to date and relevant manner. To foster and maintain a clear vision for the future of the College that reflects its educational mission and where practicable to widen the opportunities for such experience in the community.	To provide strategic leadership across all quality improvement and assurance aspects of the college's work. To ensure an excellent student experience. To ensure the effective use of data and information	To be responsible for continuous quality improvement through effective leadership and operational management of the Department, the achievement of targets for the recruitment, retention and achievement of learners and the effective and efficient deployment of staff and resources and to help people improve their performance.
	To develop high motivation and aspirations for all students so they attain the highest possible levels of achievement and best outcome from their experience at College	To developing plans, strategies and approaches to ensure high quality teaching, learning and assessment is delivered consistently across the College.	To secure improvements in the quality of provision evidenced by increasing and maintaining success rates of the learners within the Department, in line with College and department targets and published national averages.
	To motivate, satisfy and inspire staff of the college at all levels to deliver their highest levels of performance and to provide an environment in which they will develop. To oversee operations through an Executive team, to identify and exploit opportunities that will improve its educational performance.	To design innovative strategies to ensure effective use of the learner voice as a quality improvement tool. To ensure the College is at the forefront of initiatives and innovations to improve teaching, learning and assessment.	To contribute, as a member of the Curriculum Management Team of Department Heads, to the development and operational leadership of the College. To contribute to the implementation, maintenance and improvement of the College's quality assurance and improvement systems, addressing under performance and actively supporting a culture of continuous improvement.
	To work effectively with local businesses, the community and other stake-holding organisations, including international and overseas. To build effective Partnerships and External Relationships. To be the College's Accounting Officer	To support Heads of curriculum departments in the development of teaching, learning and assessment improvement strategies.	To secure for the Department's learners a high quality of experience, provision and curriculum development, drawing on support from cross college managers and teams as required. Ensure comprehensive systems are in place to improve learner attendance, retention and achievement.
	To ensure that the Board receives the information in the way it needs to function effectively and to properly discharge its responsibilities.	To produce a high quality and robust annual self-assessment report of all College provision and ensure that self-assessment of curriculum and service support functions leads to improvements.	To secure high standards of learner behaviour, leading within the Department on the of the College's student disciplinary procedures, initiating and participating in investigations as required.